

## International influences on third world development: the case of Mobutu's Zaire<sup>1</sup>

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This paper explores the international context of Mobutu's rule in Zaire. There is a long tradition in African studies of examining internal events in an international context. The historical importance of such international factors as the slave trade and colonialism are straightforward. In postindependence Africa, the phenomenon of neocolonialism (sometimes manifested in IMF/World Bank policies) has been widely noted. Yet, in recent years, many Africanists have changed their emphases and eschewed the international sphere, focusing instead on the domestic factors that produce political instability and underdevelopment (see for example, Bates, 1981). Some researchers imply that the concept of neocolonialism is merely a political epithet of no scholarly value. This paper argues that the international sphere *does* remain decisive in African politics, and that neocolonialism, despite its emotive quality and numerous criticisms, accurately describes part of contemporary political reality.

These issues will be explored in a case study of the regime of Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire. The paper will argue that the international context has been a decisive, and also underemphasized, factor in Zairian politics. It will be argued that the Mobutu dictatorship was at least partly a product of foreign intervention. External interventions, more than internal politics, were mainly responsible for promoting Mobutu as a political figure, for putting him in power in 1965, and for keeping him in power thereafter. Finally, to understand the current turmoil in Zaire, now that Mobutu seems to be tottering, it remains essential to consider these international factors. This paper, in short, will examine the historical roots of the Mobutu regime and its evolution to the present.

The Mobutu regime had its origins in the Congo Crisis of the early 1960s. The Congo had the most tumultuous and least successful decolonization experiences of any country in Africa.<sup>2</sup> Belgium did not have any real plans for decolonization even through the late 1950s. As late as 1958, the Belgian Congo was considered placid and immune to serious nationalist agitation.<sup>3</sup>

1. Note that this article builds upon my recent book, David N. Gibbs, *The Political Economy of Third World Intervention: Mines, Money, and U.S. Policy in the Congo Crisis*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991.

2. Angola may be an exception.

3. In 1958, a U.S. government document noted that "there is nothing to indicate that the Belgians will be forced out (of the Congo) soon." United States Council on Foreign Economic Policy (1958).

This optimism was misplaced, however, and the Congo too was affected by the international movement against colonialism. The riots of 1959 came as a shock to the colonial establishment and propelled the country into an extremely rapid and disorganized decolonization process, with full independence on June 30, 1960.

At independence, the country had no more than thirty university graduates, and its citizens had virtually no experience in self-government. The result was generalized disorder and a very complicated civil war, entailing extended intervention by the United Nations, Belgium, and several other foreign powers including the USA. The disorder continued sporadically during the next four years. Thus the first four years of independence, during 1960-64, were shaped by extended civil strife.

It was during the Congo Crisis that Mobutu was essentially created as a viable political figure. Before we discuss the role of Mobutu, however, we will consider Congo Crisis in a bit more detail. The Congo's preparation for self-government was quite thin; nevertheless, some institutions were hastily created by the newly formed Congolese political organizations and by the departing Belgians. By the date of independence, the Congolese had a constitution, a parliamentary democracy, and a large array of political parties. The elections of May 1960, which immediately preceded independence, gave a plurality for the Mouvement National Congolais (MNC), led by Patrice Lumumba, who was duly appointed the Congo's first prime minister. Lumumba thus became the Congo's first—and indeed only—head of state to win a truly democratic election.

Lumumba's nationalist rhetoric, especially in his independence day speech of June 30, quickly alienated Belgium. The Belgians and Lumumba each had different and mutually exclusive plans for the Congo. For the Belgians, independence was to be largely nominal. The Belgians had considerable interests in the Congo, especially in the mineral-rich Katanga region. The Société Générale de Belgique, the largest financial group in Belgium, and several other companies earned a substantial share of their profits from investments in the Congo (O'Brien, 1966, p. 173). In essence, Belgium sought to retain economic and political control of the new country for as long as possible. The senior and even middle level civil servants were mostly European, and the Belgians sought to keep it this way after independence. The entire officer corps of the new Congolese National Army was to be Belgian. The Congolese government, however, had different plans. Lumumba's MNC party advocated a gradual Africanization of the civil and military jobs and a step-by-step diminution of dependence on Belgium. Conflict between Lumumba and the Belgians was probably inevitable.

Lumumba's nationalism was compounded by an army mutiny against the continued presence of Belgians in the officer corps. Within days of independence, the Congo was in a generalized state of chaos, with Congolese soldiers on a rampage. The chaos was intensified when Belgian paratroopers moved into the Congo, nominally to restore order. The Belgians, however, went on a spree and proceeded to act just as violently as the Congolese they were sent to subdue. Lumumba demanded that the Belgian troops leave; when they

failed to do so, he severed diplomatic ties with Belgium—leading to a considerable internationalization of the crisis.

The conflict between the Belgians and Lumumba is reasonably well known. What is not so well known is the extent of Belgian intervention in the Congo during this period. The Belgian activities were described, for example, in the following United Nations intelligence report from October 1960:

During the latest phase, and in contrast with the precipitate mass departure of last July, the Belgian influx to the Congo is progressing at a steady pace and there is evidence of centralized planning behind this infiltration... The Belgians have achieved some success in reestablishing their political, or, at any rate, administrative, influence in Leopoldville... The most striking occurrence, in recent weeks... was the taking of office by Mr. M. Tshibamba in the Ministry of Health, who following his appointment on 20 September, as *Commissaire general*, arrived with half a dozen Belgian advisers... One of the latter told ONUC [United Nations] staff member that there was no longer any need for their [sic] Advisory team, "since we, Belgians, are back in power."<sup>4</sup>

The Belgians were thus infiltrating the Congolese government, and attempting to manipulate government policies in ways that would favour Belgium. The Belgians also helped foment secessions in the strategic and profitable provinces of Katanga and South Kasai. These provinces were nominally under rule of African secessionist governments; declassified documents suggest that these governments were very strongly influenced and largely created by Belgian intervention.<sup>5</sup> The Belgians, especially companies in the Société Générale group, provided substantial financial and military aid to both Katanga and South Kasai, while the Belgian government also supported the secessionists. Former UN official Conor Cruise O'Brien (1966, p. 226) noted that the Katangese government was widely considered "nothing but a mask for continuing European rule." This statement quite accurately sums up the Katanga secession.

Lumumba strongly opposed the regional secessions, arguing that they had been engineered by Belgium. He appealed for international aid for support against Belgium, first from the United States, then from the United Nations, and finally from the USSR. Most analyses of the Congo Crisis have placed considerable emphasis on the roles of the United Nations and the USSR in the conflict. This essay however will eschew these topics for reasons of space and also since the UN and USSR did not play a decisive role in the rise of Mobutu.<sup>6</sup>

The United States, in contrast, was decisive and the American role will, therefore, merit closer attention. The United States actively opposed Lumumba. In memoirs, American officials almost universally expressed

4. See United Nations (1960). This document is untitled and is not explicitly identified as a UN document. However, the author is confident that it was written by UN staff since it was found in the UN archives, in a folder marked "Pol(itical) and Sec(urity) Matters." The report was written from a UN standpoint and in the style of an intelligence report.

5. For extended discussion of this, see Gibbs, 1991a, especially, pp. 84-89.

6. For extensive details on the UN role in the Congo, see Gendebien (1967); on the USSR, see Kalb (1982).

strong dislike of Lumumba, considering him unstable and potentially pro-communist. Most Congo/Zaire specialists disagree with these conclusions and fault American policy for its anti-Lumumba bias; for better or worse, however, American officials sought to undermine the Congolese prime minister. By the summer of 1960, the United States committed itself to a policy of overthrowing Lumumba, by covert means, and this commitment was intensified by Lumumba's turn toward the Soviets.

Joseph-Desiré Mobutu (his original name) was a central figure in all of this intrigue. He was the number two man in the Congolese army in rank, and the number one figure in terms of effective influence. The former sergeant (the rank he had held in the colonial militia) had become a colonel and chief of staff of the Congolese armed forces. Mobutu's advancement was facilitated by his support from the local CIA station in the Congo, which was then running one of the largest covert operations in the history of the Agency. The CIA was indeed a force throughout the Congo Crisis. The *New York Times* (1966) later provided the assessment: "After... independence from Belgium, a modest little CIA office in Leopoldville [Kinshasa now] mushroomed overnight into a virtual embassy and miniature war department... Starting almost from scratch... the CIA dispersed its agents to learn Congolese politics from the bush on up, to recruit likely leaders and to finance their bids for power." In a public discussion, former CIA Director William Colby (quoted in *Harper's*, 1984, p. 36) later referred to the Congo operation as one of the most successful projects in the history of the Agency.

Let us take a closer look at this intervention. The Central Intelligence Agency was actively attempting to mold governments in the Congo and was seeking Congolese who were considered "reliable" and pro-American. Mobutu essentially was selected by the CIA. It is not clear when the Agency first made contact with Mobutu, but it probably occurred even before the Congo's independence in 1960. According to a *New York Times* article (1966), the CIA had "found Mobutu" before Congolese independence and Mobutu's "eventual emergence as president of the country... proved a tribute to the Americans' judgement and tactics." In all probability, Mobutu was first discovered by the CIA in 1959, when he was a student in Belgium.

The *Times* article does not mention who actually "discovered" Mobutu. The most likely candidate would be Lawrence Devlin who was, in 1959, a middle ranking CIA officer based in Brussels.<sup>7</sup> Devlin himself had excellent career-related reasons for making the contact with Mobutu. In Belgium during the late 1950s, Devlin was far from the center of CIA activity. Without the prospect of "action," Devlin faced dim promotion prospects since in the Agency, officers must organize covert operations in order to achieve promo-

7. With regard to Devlin's presence in Brussels, see his biography *Who's Who in Government* (1972-73). On Devlin's CIA affiliation, see Stockwell (1978, p. 71). On Mobutu's presence in Brussels, see his biography in *African Biographies* (1971).

tion.<sup>8</sup> Devlin also must have realized that the Agency had few contacts in the Congo and that such contacts would be needed for the emerging crisis.

The recruitment of Mobutu helped to solve both Devlin's and the CIA's problems. The friendship between Mobutu and Devlin endured for many years and was a staple feature of U.S. influence in that country. It greatly aided Devlin's career advancement and it also provided the Agency with a crucially important lever during the Congo Crisis. When the Congo became independent, Devlin became the CIA's chief of station in the new country and ran the Congo operation for several years. He later became the chief of the Africa Division and one of the most senior officers in the Agency. Devlin's main source of influence has continually been his close friendship with Mobutu. In 1974, Devlin retired from government service, but he remained active as the representative of a U.S. investor in the Congo. He also remained an important element in U.S. relations with the Congo/Zaire.<sup>9</sup> The relationship between Mobutu and Devlin has influenced the course of Congolese/Zairian history.

And the CIA-Mobutu connection was critically important during the turmoil of the Congo Crisis of the early 1960s. The Agency was financing the Congolese National Army and funneling the payments through Colonel (later General) Mobutu. Madeline Kalb reports that it was "money supplied by the CIA and by the Western embassies in Leopoldville that kept him [Mobutu] in business" during the Congo Crisis (Kalb, 1982, p. 96; see also Dayal, 1976, p. 66). Mobutu's highly paid soldiers probably did not number more than a few hundred, but they constituted virtually the only functioning units in the Congolese National Army.<sup>10</sup> (The remainder of the army was in total disarray during this period.) With such a political base, Mobutu was able to play a decisive role. The CIA used Mobutu and his soldiers as a free-lance strike force.

On September 14, Mobutu staged a coup d'état. He suspended the Congolese parliament and the constitution, and he set up a military government led by himself. This was Mobutu's first seizure of power, and the United States was clearly involved in the coup. Former CIA officer Victor Marchetti (1988) confirmed that the Agency helped bring Colonel Mobutu to power in 1960. One of Mobutu's first actions was to expel the Soviet and Czechoslovak missions to the Congo; this action was obviously favourable for the United States. Lumumba was later arrested and, in January 1961, he was assassinated. Mobutu's troops were responsible for arresting Lumumba, and they helped facilitate, at least indirectly, the killing of the prime minister. It is also likely that the CIA was involved in the killing, although 100 percent certainty ("smoking gun evidence") is elusive.<sup>11</sup>

8. These career considerations are emphasised throughout the memoirs of former CIA officer Stockwell (1978).

9. See Kwitny (1984), pp. 58, 59; and Stockwell (1978), pp. 136-37, 169.

10. Young (1965, p. 447) notes that Mobutu's power was "based on his firm control of a very small number of men. The bulk of the army was simply too disorganised to play a role."

11. A fascinating discussion of CIA efforts to assassinate Lumumba can be found in United States Senate (1976, chap. 3).

In January 1961, several days after Lumumba's death, the United States had a new president: John F. Kennedy. American policy changed considerably during the Kennedy administration. Whereas Eisenhower essentially supported Belgian policy in the Congo (and the Belgian-sponsored Katanga and South Kasai secessionist states), Kennedy opposed the Belgians. The Kennedy period was marked by acrimonious feuding between the USA and the Belgian interests. European newspapers, especially in Belgium, denounced American "imperialism" in the Congo. The U.S. ambassador to Belgium later noted, "Conservative and business circles here [in Belgium] have long harboured suspicions that disguised air [aim?] U.S. policy in Congo is to obtain commercial advantage for American business at expense [of] established Belgian concerns" (U.S. Department of State, 1967a). Europeans widely suspected that the USA was attempting to push the Europeans out of Central Africa and concomitantly to increase American power in the region. During the period 1961-63, U.S. policy was often at odds with that of the European countries, especially France, Great Britain, and Belgium. The Europeans supported the regional secessions, especially Katanga, while the United States opposed them.

There were other differences between Eisenhower and Kennedy. Kennedy had a much more acute sense of public relations; he was somewhat uncomfortable with the Mobutu government which was, after all, a simple military dictatorship. Accordingly, the Kennedy administration insisted that Mobutu step down and return the country to civilian rule. Mobutu dutifully resigned in February 1961 and the Congo reverted (at least on paper) to parliamentary government. General Mobutu returned to his job as military commander. To run the country Kennedy relied on a series of civilian governments, mostly under Prime Minister Cyrille Adoula. These governments were not exactly models of Jeffersonian democracy, and they were largely organized by U.S. intervention. The *New York Times* (1966) later noted that "Money and shiny American automobiles furnished through the logistical wizardry of Langley [CIA headquarters] are said to have been the deciding factors in the vote that brought Mr. Adoula to power." Even during the period of civilian government Mobutu remained in the wings, playing important behind-the-scenes roles. And he was backed by the ever-present CIA station and its head Lawrence Devlin, who was now gaining considerable respect within the Agency for his role in the Congo operation.

So, Kennedy wanted governments in the Congo that were favourable toward American interests, but he also wanted ones that had at least some international legitimacy. In addition, Kennedy was eager to terminate the regional secessions, in Katanga and Kasai, which were causing so much disorder in the country. These goals were gradually achieved, with aid from the United Nations peacekeeping force in the Congo. With American support, the UN force staged military actions against the secessionists, leading to their eventual termination. The South Kasai secession was defeated in 1962, and Katanga was crushed by early 1963 (see Weissman, 1974). The Congo Crisis officially ended in 1963 and the world's attention shifted elsewhere.

With the Congo out of the headlines, a semblance of civilian government was no longer really needed in the Congo. Accordingly, the CIA began

thinking of bringing Mobutu back to power, since Mobutu was always regarded as the most reliable and pro-American figure in the Congo. Two CIA officers, in a 1963 interview with a researcher, hinted that they might welcome a takeover by Mobutu. The CIA officers believed that "Mobutu... is pro-West and pro-U.S.... He is as solid as any man we have in the Congo and he might conceivably lead a military government... He might even direct a coup."<sup>12</sup>

However, the CIA could not bring Mobutu to power in 1963, since the Congo faced a new round of disorder and violence. Specifically, a series of rebel groups, mostly former followers of Patrice Lumumba, staged major insurrections. By 1964, they controlled large areas and threatened to overrun the whole country. The Congo was again in the newspapers. The USA was determined to defeat the rebels, who were regarded as anti-Western, and to preserve the authority of the central government. A major counterinsurgency was launched, largely under U.S. and Belgian direction (Odom, 1988). In the context of this new uprising the CIA restrained itself and did not bring Mobutu to power. American officials apparently preferred a parliamentary form of government during this period—at least until the rebels could be defeated. Mobutu remained military commander and waited a little longer for his next chance at power.

By 1965, the rebellions were largely contained. In November 1965, Mobutu staged his long awaited coup, deposed the prime minister, and seized full power. The CIA was definitely involved in the coup. Stephen Weissman (1979, p. 273), a congressional investigator, gives the following account: "According to three informed individuals—a U.S. official then in Washington, a Western diplomatic Congo specialist, and an American businessman who talked with the returned CIA man Devlin—the CIA was at least 'involved' in the... coup of November 25, 1965." Former CIA officers John Stockwell (cited in *Harper's*, 1984, p. 36) and Victor Marchetti (1986) both state the Agency supported Mobutu's coup. A *Fortune* (1982) magazine article noted that Lawrence Devlin "helped put Mobutu in power." The Belgian newspaper *La Libre Belgique* stated, in 1966, "It is no longer a secret, in diplomatic circles, that the CIA helped Mobutu take power."<sup>13</sup>

Mobutu quickly consolidated his rule and established a full-scale dictatorship, abolishing the parliament in 1967. The U.S. role increased substantially during General Mobutu's government, and it helped to keep the general in power. Throughout the late 1960s, the Mobutu regime had an extended feud with the Société Générale and its affiliated mining companies, which had traditionally dominated the Congolese economy. Mobutu nationalized the Belgian mining concessions in 1967; the Belgians retaliated by boycotting Congolese copper. The United States generally backed Mobutu during this

12. Ernest W. Lefever Papers (1963), "Conversion with Mssrs Larry Devlin and (name deleted by the author) of the CIA," p. 2, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Box 8. The author has deleted the second name because U.S. law now prohibits the publication of the names of CIA officers. Devlin's name is included since his CIA affiliation is already on the public record. The quote is directly from the interview notes, which paraphrased the CIA men.

13. Translated from the French. For further evidence of CIA involvement, see Pachter (1987, p. 107).

dispute and U.S. government officials ultimately helped to resolve it. In 1967, Mobutu was challenged by a revolt of white mercenaries. The United States supplied military aid and logistical support that was decisive in defeating this rebellion (see Gibbs, 1991a, chap. 6).

American government representatives gained considerable influence during the Mobutu era. CIA officer Devlin became a close, informal advisor to Mobutu. According to a former CIA officer (Stockwell, 1978, pp. 136-37), Devlin maintained "an intimate friendship with and ready access to" Mobutu. The U.S. ambassador helped Mobutu write a new foreign investment code (Vance, n.d. p. 206). Former White House advisor Theodore Sorensen worked as Mobutu's legal counsel during the dispute with Société Générale. The dispute was mediated and finally settled in 1969 by Robert McNamara, another former U.S. official who was then president of World Bank (Radmann, 1978). American officials, in short, held considerable influence with the new Mobutu regime.

Moreover, U.S. investors began to penetrate the Congo and, in at least one case, an American investor became an important advisor to Mobutu. Maurice Tempelsman, a New York diamond trader, developed very close connections to both the Mobutu regime and to U.S. foreign policymakers.<sup>14</sup> In 1967, a heavily censored U.S. State Department (1967b) document observed: "Tempelsman is playing increasingly central role as GDRC [Congoese government] technical adviser and mediator." Another State Department report (1967c) cited evidence that Tempelsman was "very influential with Mobutu." Tempelsman counseled Mobutu to hire Theodore Sorensen for legal advice. This probably increased Tempelsman influence, since Sorensen himself was also Tempelsman's lawyer. Tempelsman's access increased still further when, in 1974, CIA officer Devlin retired from government service and worked as Tempelsman's personal representative in Zaire, where he remained until full retirement in 1987. Such political connections probably facilitated Tempelsman's investment activities. These commercial ties augmented the American presence generally, especially since the U.S. government and investors worked together very closely (Gibbs, 1991a, chap. 6).

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Congo was considered a good place for foreign investment, with rich natural resources and a strong, pro-Western leader.<sup>15</sup> Substantial investments were forthcoming, especially in turn-key factory projects, commercial bank loans, hydroelectric power, and mineral/oil development. American investors were particularly favoured. Belgian investment declined relative to other nationalities, but it still played a major role, especially in the copper marketing area. Other European countries, notably France, also gained important influence, both politically and commercially.

14. On Tempelsman, see the following: *Fortune* (1982); *Washington Post* (1979); and Gibbs (1991a), especially chaps. 4, 6.

15. Of course, many of the resulting investment schemes ultimately proved to be failures and lost money. There is little doubt that many investors regret having made their investments in Mobutu's Zaire. Nevertheless, the investment mood was upbeat until the late 1970s.



But it was the USA that was favoured above all. Under Mobutu, the Congo essentially became an American sphere of influence. By 1967, the *New York Times* reported, "No other nation, not even Belgium, is as deeply involved in the Congo as is the United States," while the *London Daily Telegraph* referred to the USA as the "caretaker power" in the Congo (both quoted in Struelens, 1976, p. 178). U.S. involvement was also growing in the commercial sphere. In the area of loans—the largest source of foreign capital—American banks played the leading role. By the end of 1977, American banks had provided 35.5 percent of all loans to the Congo, while Belgian banks accounted for only 8.3 percent.<sup>16</sup> The USA thus became dominant in the Congo, and this new influence often led to disputes with the European powers, especially Belgium. Many Belgians, in both the private sector and in the government believed that the United States was expanding its influence in Central Africa and displacing the Belgians. U.S.–European disputes continued through the 1970s, and these were often acrimonious in character. But the Western powers could sometimes set aside their differences and cooperate in the Congo/Zaire. Such cooperation was instrumental in maintaining Mobutu in power. In 1977, French, Moroccan, and U.S. aid helped crush a rebellion in Shaba (formerly Katanga) province. In 1978, a more serious rebellion emerged. This time French and Belgian parachute units, dropped from U.S. Air Force planes, helped defeat the uprising. The Western powers (along with People's Republic of China, North Korea, and Israel) provided extensive economic and military aid. Without this foreign support it is doubtful that Mobutu could have survived politically. Mobutu clearly received support from diverse sources; but it was always the United States that was the most important of these foreign supporters.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the United States remained an enthusiastic backer of Mobutu, even as his rule became more openly brutal and more corrupt. In 1975, a State Department official stated "We do have... a warm spot in our hearts for president Mobutu" (quoted in Gibbs, 1991b). The intimacy continued into the Reagan era. In 1986 Mobutu made a state visit to the United States, where President Ronald Reagan termed him "a voice of good sense and good will" (quoted in Winternitz, 1987, p. 270). Until quite recently, America provided more aid to Zaire than to any other country in sub-Saharan Africa (*Africa News*, 1990).

Now, after 26 years in power, it appears that Mobutu is on his way out, and his foreign support appears to be eroding. France and Belgium have called for Mobutu's resignation. In September both countries sent troops to Zaire, in order to protect their nationals—but the Europeans made no apparent effort to support Mobutu as they had done in the past. Even the United States has begun to distance itself from the dictatorship. A terse *Le Monde* (1991) headline noted "The Dumping of President Mobutu" by the Western powers. A complete analysis of this change in Western policy would go be-

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16. Huybrechts et al., n.d., p. 219. Note that the Huybrechts discussion of loans does not specify whether the figures include only commercial banks or if the figures also include loans by public institutions, such as the Export-Import Bank.

yond the present essay.<sup>17</sup> The important point here is that recent opposition to Mobutu represents a considerable change in policy by the Western powers. We have seen that Mobutu was essentially a creation of foreign intervention in Zaire.

A full understanding of Zairian development must consider the international factors that we have noted here, and how the country was influenced by these factors. Mobutu himself—certainly a decisive influence on country—was largely the product of foreign intervention. Too often Africanists have overlooked or at least underestimated the significance of intervention. The Congo/Zaire case should serve to underscore, once again, the importance of the international dimension in studying African politics.

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17. And it should be noted that any conclusions with regard to current U.S. policies must be tentative, since so little is known about the activities of the Central Intelligence Agency at this time. A full evaluation would require access to the (now classified) documentation.

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