

Introduction: Decolonization in the Congo (DRC)—Fifty Years Later

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Fifty years after the occurrence of a major event, a golden jubilee, is often an opportunity for celebration and reminiscing over fond memories. Conventional wisdom would project such an event as a landmark likely to serve as a stepping stone toward greater achievements.

As in most African countries on Independence Day, there were formalities in Kinshasa on June 30, 2010. But while the political establishment—flanked with foreign dignitaries, including King Albert II and Queen Paola of Belgium—watched a military parade to showcase the existence of political institutions, unusually large numbers of ordinary people went about their normal daily business. The general mood in both the capital city and elsewhere was one of indifference, reflecting the hardships of daily life and the challenges of mere survival: over the course of fifty years, the per capita income had been halved. The whole atmosphere had an eerie feeling, suggesting a tamed anxiety and a simmering anger from unfulfilled promises. The euphoria of the 1960s has withered into the obvious gloom made visible in the tattered infrastructure of the capital city. In June 2010, the mood was more somber than celebratory.

Such a moment invited deep reflection on the past, a scrutiny of the main causes underlying this general malaise, and of course many ques-

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tions about the future, given the paralyzing circumstances that have been inflicted upon these people. To that end, scores of conferences, symposia, television programs, and workshops commemorated the occasion at home and abroad. Among them, the Congolese Studies Association/Association des Études Congolaises devoted a roundtable to reflect on the road traveled by the Democratic Republic of Congo during the half-century of independence and to analyze the sad fate of millions of individuals often totally neglected by the international press, global political discourse, Western policymakers, and research institutions. The venue was the African Studies Association's 53rd Meeting in San Francisco on November 20, 2010. The slate included panelists with deep expertise on Congolese issues and careers that have been marked by long dedication to the area, continued research, and unwavering close involvement. Putting together such an interdisciplinary panel was in itself a challenge, but the efforts paid off in the quality of the presentations. Of course, presentations of this nature cannot go deeply into original research; they are intended as brief but accessible overviews of particular perspectives on particular topics—reaching out to nonspecialists by summarizing the work of many scholars in the field. Despite their individual disciplinary approaches, the presentations converged in observing that the initial hopes for a bright future in the Congo were crushed over time, as hope alternated with disappointment and despair.

The intellectual ambiguity embedded in the central theme of the roundtable led to divergent visions of the topic. One approach reexamined the politics of the independence struggle—from the perspective of fifty years later. Another explored the character of the decolonization process by tracing the trajectory of Congolese experience over the last fifty years. Both perspectives are relevant, and both are represented here. In addition, it was felt that many features of postcolonial history in the Congo converge with challenges prevalent elsewhere in Africa—though the political particularities of each state make their histories unique. Some of those themes include the enthusiasm of decolonization giving way to disillusionment; the experience of autocracy and enduring economic decline; the presence of several forms of violence; and the power of outside influences on the political and economic trajectories affecting people within. All of these characteristics of the Congolese case find resonance in other social experiences across Africa.

Herbert Weiss—whose many contributions to our understanding of the PSA party organization and the relations of rural people to the political elite are well known—sets the stage by revisiting the independence struggle itself. Despite the often-mentioned shortage of an elite able to hold positions of leadership, he argues nonetheless that the Congo had a chance to fare reasonably well had most of the players lived up to their commitments. Would a delay of independence have averted, or at least mitigated, the train of tragedies, as Weiss implies?

Michael Schatzberg dismisses ready-made answers often mentioned in the mainstream press to account for the situation of the Congo—ethnic tensions, corruption, and lack of democratic institutions. Instead, by identifying specific themes in the unfolding history of the Congo since independence, he seeks the underlying causes of the many disabling disasters that have affected the country, and convincingly links these sad occurrences to what he calls “deep structural roots” evident in both the near and deeper past: the search for an equitable political order, the extension of predatory practices, and the prevalent misconception of political power as source of personal wealth.

Patience Kabamba’s presentation draws on export figures to underscore what Schatzberg refers to as outside predatory practices. But Kabamba highlights a particular issue in more depth: the role of neighboring countries in those practices, specifically the occupation of the eastern areas from the 1990s, most notably focusing on the role of Rwanda in the regional politics.

David Newbury concludes the overview by proposing a broader historical framework within which to place these themes and issues. Examining Congo’s difficult trajectory as an ongoing process of unresolved decolonization, he identifies four overlapping phases of unequal length and intensity: Lumumba’s six months of hope at independence; the subsequent four years associated with the popular struggles for a “Second Independence”; President Mobutu’s thirty-two years of repression; and the period since Mobutu, marked by violence on a horrendous scale, especially in the east. With the exception of the first phase (and for ephemeral moments of other phases), each of these stages has seen further decline in the living conditions of the majority of the Congolese people.

Yet while these presentations focused on the dynamics of Congolese politics since independence, they omitted a detailed analysis of untold hardships occurring in the eastern part of the country—especially notable in the horrors inflicted on women—in a context in which many competing interests criss-cross but share one element in particular: the lack of concern for the essential fabric of the local communities. That is the reason that continued attention to this region is imperative, fifty years after formal decolonization, as people still struggle today for the fruits of a true “independence.” While the papers could not examine these issues in detail, collectively they sketch out the tragic trajectory of the Congo since decolonization.

In 1908 King Leopold turned over the *État Indépendent du Congo* to the Belgian Parliament. Fifty-two years later came decolonization from Belgium. Now, a hundred years later, the people of the “postcolony” of Congo still await the fruits of independence. The presentations offered here provide a modest framework for a sober analysis of the hardships faced by the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We hope they create an

opportunity to continue the discussion—in a fashion demonstrated by the high attendance and abundance of follow-up questions at the session at which these papers were first presented.