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## **The Mobutu Regime: Leveraging State Weakness**

### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on regime survival in Zaire/Congo. The author will analyse the events in Zaire during Joseph Mobutu's reign from 1960 to 1997 through the lens of regime and linkage theories. It is no secret that President Mobutu came to power with Western (US and Belgian) assistance. It is also no surprise that Mobutu was dependent on Western support to remain in power. But it is remarkable that when this support was suddenly withdrawn after the Cold War, Mobutu was able to resist both Western pressure to abdicate and internal opposition, and did so successfully until he was invaded by his smaller neighbours and fled in May 1997. If Mobutu was so dependent on Western support, how did he manage to keep his regime afloat at a time when diplomatic and financial ties were severed? How is it possible that he was able to cling on to power with democratic protests on his doorstep, with no capable army and no alternative great powers to court? The author will show that a combination of regime and linkage theories can formulate answer to these questions by linking the domestic and external relations in one model. This text will not provide a full historical overview of the events in Congo/Zaire from 1960 to 1997, but only pick out those phases, which are necessary to explain regime behaviour.

*Keywords:* Mobutu, Personalist regimes, Zaire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Linkage, Leverage

### **Regimes, leverage and linkage**

S. Levitsky and L. Way were the first to develop a coherent theoretical framework to analyse democracy promotion as a global phenomenon. While their interest was to explain the halted democratic transitions in the so-called hybrid regimes: authoritarian

regimes with a democratic façade, they did develop a model that focuses on actors promoting democracy and possessing various forms of leverage to do so; and on the various channels this promotion can take place – linkage.

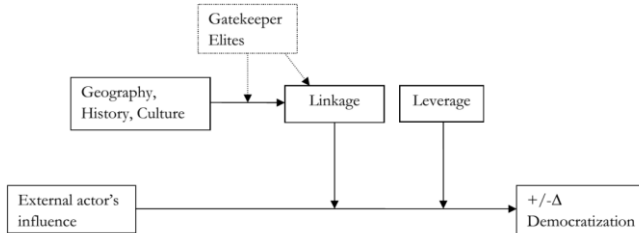
In 2010 a Danish professor, Jakob Tolstrup, updated their model to address various important shortcomings. Levitsky & Way only focused on Western promotion, but disregarded that the modes of channelling leverage into influence are in essence neutral, and the model should also be used to focus on negative influence that counters democratization processes. Finally, Tolstrup criticized Levitsky & Way's model for ignoring any forms of agency for the political elites that are subjected to such leverage. In result the aspects of linkage were presented as petrified and almost reduced to geographical proximity between the actor promoting democratization and the target country (Tolstrup 2010).

The amount of leverage an external actor possesses depends on three factors: (1) the state's raw size and military and economic strength, (2) the existing of competing issues on the external actor's policy agendas, (3) the existence of alternative regional powers that can support the country politically, economically, and militarily. Linkage then refers to the density of ties to the external actor or multilateral institutions dominated by it. (Tolstrup 2010: 33). Levitsky & Way have identified five elements, which have been updated by Tolstrup:

- economic linkage – credit, investment and assistance, patterns of export and import
- geopolitical linkage – ties to governments and alliances and organizations
- social linkage – tourism, migration, diaspora communities, and elite education abroad
- communication linkage – cross-border telecommunications, Internet connections and foreign media penetration
- transnational civil society linkage – ties to international NGOs, churches, party organizations, and other networks (Tolstrup 2010: 33).

In his article Tolstrup convincingly argues that elites have agency and can affect the various forms of linkage, enhancing or eroding foreign influence. Figure 1 offers a visualization of Tolstrup’s updated model (Tolstrup 2010: 32).

Figure 1. Model of when external actors can influence democratization



The economic, cultural and political ties elites build out over time are not carved in stone (unlike the geographical links). Elites have a significant influence to assess the costs and benefits of maintaining such ties and whether or not to give in to external demands. Some elites are more successful than others in this respect. Therefore, the author replaced elites with regimes, in order to differentiate between their variations in performance. However, comparing regime’s types is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I will focus on the highly-personalized Mobutu regime, drawing from Tolstrup’s theory to investigate foreign influence, and from regime theories in order to explain internal dimensions as well. The aim is to answer the questions posed at the beginning of this paper.

### **Mobutu’s Ascend to Power**

Mobutu’s rise took place against a background of chaos and high international anxiety. When the former Belgian colony became independent on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1960 as the Republic of Congo, state structures quickly collapsed one-by-one and plunged the new state in deep crisis. There were many omens this could happen: the Belgian colonial system did everything to postpone independency. For the Ministry of Colonies and the Belgian government the mere idea of

independence had been preposterous in 1950, undesired in 1956, an idealistic future scenario that would take decades of preparation in 1958, and completely unstoppable by 1959. The colonial government seemed to be always one or two steps behind in their reaction on events: using repression led to more protests; granting small concessions like local elections only fuelled greater demands from Congolese side.

Finally the Congolese political leaders, each with their own regional or ethnic base of support, were invited to Brussels on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1959. Lumumba, the only politician with a national program, was freed from jail on demand of the other Congolese leaders. A united Congolese front took the unprepared Belgian delegation by surprise and a date for independence was set. With the announcement of national elections, the unity made place for bitter rivalry among Congo's political voices. Absorbed by their election campaign, they were absent during the second negotiations in Brussels, in which Belgium secured most of its financial assets in light of the new Congolese order.

The new political system installed in Leopoldville was mirrored on the complicated Belgian consociation model. However, creating a ruling coalition from the new-born and fractured party-landscape in which every party was deeply entrenched in its local or ethnic roots proved difficult. With some Belgian mediation, Patrice Emery Lumumba, leader of the 'Mouvement National Congolais' (MNC), the biggest party with 26.6% of the vote, agreed to accept the post of Prime Minister and hand over the presidency to his smaller coalition partner ABAKO (Alliance des Bakongo, 9.5%). Its leader, Joseph Kasavubu took the post. The biggest loser within the coalition was CONAKAT (Confederation des associations tribales du Katanga), led by Moïse Tshombe. CONAKAT only conquered 4.7% of the vote and some minister posts, while representing the economic engine of Congo: the mining industry in Katanga.

When this weak political constellation declared Congo's independence and took over power from the Belgians in a grand ceremony, the illusion of prosperity was complete. Alas, only one little push from a group that saw no benefits in this new reality

would suffice to topple the political pillar and through a domino-effect destabilize the economical one as well. This disgruntled group was the Force Publique (FP), the former colonial army, whose draftees were denied all fruits of independence: still ruled by Belgian officers, these soldiers were subject to rigid discipline and harsh corporal punishments for the meanest transgressions. At a disciplinary speech, General Janssens made clear that while the citizens celebrated the new era in the streets, for them, the soldiers everything was going to remain as before the independence.

With such a weak, divided government, the army was bound to interfere in politics. What was so remarkable in Congo was the speed by which the army became an instrument of local power politics. As different political factions co-opted their ethnic regiments for local agendas, a civil war quickly became inevitable. Especially as different foreign actors made their own alliances with their own regional elites. In the end it became more convenient to thrust Congolese politicians aside altogether and restore order by dealing with the army officials directly.

The garrison's mutiny started Thysville. They demanded better pay, less corporal punishment by former colonial officers and promotion of African officers. While the riots themselves were small in scale, it were the rumours of rape on white women, which sent shockwaves through the white population. The government promised concessions to ease the tensions. Among them were the replacement of Janssens and the rapid advance of Congolese to senior positions within the FP. This last appeasement destabilized the FP, which would prove a disastrous move in order to gain the military upper hand in the later secessions of Kasai and Katanga. Belgium responded by first offering assistance to the new Congolese government, but then refused to wait for their final decision. The former colonizer decided to act unilaterally to protect its citizens and safeguard its economic interests, de facto invading Congo, bombing the port of Matadi and sending paratroopers to detain whole garrisons of the FP. Even this did not stop the panic: whites and their families left in the thousands leaving behind their plantations and firms, plunging Congo in an abrupt economic crisis. To make things

worse, sensing the weakness of the central government, Katanga, Congo's richest province, and later Kasai declared independence on 11<sup>th</sup> July and on 8<sup>th</sup> August respectively. They received tacit support from Belgium and foreign firms with huge stakes in these regions.

The political pillar would not hold out much longer: Kasavubu and Lumumba quickly fell out on the issue how to muster foreign support to reunite the country and get the Belgians to leave. This was the point where Lumumba had a serious disadvantage. Lumumba's MNC "[...] was undoubtedly the only political party to have a radical program aiming at transforming the economic structure of the Zairian society. In addition, the MNC was the only political party organized on a national rather than ethnic basis. Given his radical stands, Lumumba was not expected to get any Western assistance. In the struggle for the control of the postcolonial state, Lumumba exclusively relied on the Zairian masses while other Zairian leaders were seeking foreign support" (Naniuzeyi 1999: 678). Lumumba had already burned his bridges with the Belgians at the independence's ceremony in which he insulted the Belgian king, Boudewijn, and for firing general Janssens. In return the Belgians were most eager to support Tshombe's secession and his CONAKAT, which party program adhered to a slow and cooperative way to independence.

Even when the UN put together an international force with remarkable speed in order to replace the disintegrated FP troops and restore order in the Congo, these foreign troops would be responsible to the international body and not, as Lumumba initially anticipated, to the Congolese government (Young 1984: 722). Also the US quickly lost faith in him. After making a bad impression on the US representatives during their visit, Lumumba continued his international isolation by accusing the UN for supporting the colonizer over the colonized when addressing the issue of the Belgian troops still present on Congolese soil. The Belgians refused to leave as long as the safety of their citizens could not be guaranteed. As inexperienced politicians, Lumumba and Kasavubu panicked and desperately turned to the Soviets for assistance. Khrushchev reacted immediately by sending ten Ilyushin planes with

food and arms to Congo (Van Reybrouk 2010: 318). This way he personally dragged the Cold War on Congo's doorstep and unconsciously signed his own death warrant.

It was in this context that Mobutu slowly came to power. Due to his close friendship with Lumumba, Joseph Désiré Mobutu had already made great promotional leaps forward within the Force Publique, now called Armée Nationale Congolèse (ANC). In a couple of months he rose to the position of Chief of Staff, even though he did not have much army experience and practiced journalism before independence. He was at the right place at the right time, when the CIA and Belgians were looking for trusted allies within the Congolese government. Despite his friendship with Lumumba he joined the same camp as Kasavubu, when the latter was urged by the great powers to politically neutralize Lumumba. On 5<sup>th</sup> September 1960 Kasavubu fired Lumumba as Prime Minister in a public radio broadcast. Lumumba reacted fast and an hour later already dismissed Kasavubu as president. The political chaos was complete. When the parliament supported Lumumba over Kasavubu on 13<sup>th</sup> September his Western allies realized Kasavubu did not have the authority to lead (Van Reybrouk 2010: 321-323). The next day, Colonel Mobutu, Chief of Staff, suspended the political scene for a year and installed a government of technocrats with support of the CIA. The first *coup d'état* was a fact.

Mobutu was well aware he was plan B for the CIA in case Kasavubu turned out too weak to take the lead. With no vote cast in his name, a “temporary technocratic government” was the furthest he could go without facing complete popular insurrection. As soon as he *de facto* took over the country, he started building out his own patronage networks and destroying potential challengers. Further, he did not allow Kasavubu to rebuild his power-base.

With UN support, troops loyal to Lumumba were removed from key positions and strategic locations (De Witte 1996: 271-2). Since Kasavubu proved unable to defeat Lumumba politically, the way was paved for a military dictatorship. The main targets were the two rivalling Congolese governments: the Kasavubu-faction and the Lumumba-faction, led by Antoine Gizenga as Lumumba was kept



under house arrest by Kasavubu, but also protected by ring of Ghanaian UN-troops around his house. Journalist De Witte states that even the UN was surprised by Mobutu's coup, but embraced it consequently. The new government consisted of many young Congolese, who had good ties with Belgium, where they obtained their university degrees. The government was apolitical and neutral, and did not have the support of the people, who had become more nationalistic and anti-Belgian.

Without foreign help, Mobutu would not have maintained the upper hand. His regime was still weak and he had many internal and external challengers to his rule. Different parts of the army had diverse loyalties and without active help of the UN, he would have been disposed of for sure (De Witte 1996: 285). Even with the UN's help in paying the army's wages he could only persuade some parts of the army. With their active involvement he arrested conspirators. Repressive measures were also necessary to reform the army. Swiftly key positions went to loyal Congolese from Mobutu's home region, Equateur (De Witte 1996: 287). Nonetheless, Lumumba proved a lingering threat even when under house arrest. When he escaped from his house arrest to recapture the throne and reorganize in his firm support base in Stanleyville, he was arrested by Mobutu's troops on the road. If Lumumba had not lingered in the capital to give a speech, he would have made the trip (Van Reybrouck 2010: 325). A mutiny broke out again in Thysville after his arrest became public knowledge.

The new regime did not know what to do with him. In the end it was the Belgian government who put pressure on Tshombe to accept Lumumba and two other captives. They arranged to transfer the three prisoners to Katanga, a completely hostile environment far away from the capital where Lumumba would be unable to rally for support, and at the same time gave the Belgians the opportunity to strengthen their ties with the new regime in Leopoldville. On 17<sup>th</sup> January Lumumba and his colleagues landed in Katanga. They were tortured and murdered later on the same day. Mobutu and the Belgians could wash their hands in innocence and pin Lumumba's murder on Tshombe. This master move caused an outrage in the

global arena and gave new impetus to annex Katanga and Kasai. The UN-ANC operations were prolonged and difficult. National unity was finally achieved in 1963, after US President Kennedy approved operation 'Grandslam.' Tshombe fled to Spain and his hirelings crossed the border to Angola (Van Reybrouck 2010: 328-337).

In the beginning US policy towards the Congo was very sensitive to Belgian preferences. During colonial times the US refrained from sending African American staff to its embassy in Leopoldville so they would not upset racial concerns US intelligence was restricted in the territory, relying on Belgian reports and limited technical aid plans were formulated and implemented in cooperation with colonial authorities (Schraeder 1994: 52).

After the FP mutiny and Belgian invasion, the Congo crisis received considerable US attention. Despite Lumumba's negative reputation within US policy circles, the US pursued a diplomatic solution, appeasing both Congolese and Belgian sides. In order not to provoke they send a multinational peacekeeping force under the UN banner. It was not until Lumumba fell out with the Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, which refused to take on military action against the separatists in Katanga, and turned to Soviet assistance, the US prepared for covert actions (Schraeder 1994: 54-55).

The CIA took the lead in preparing Lumumba's assassination, firstly by disabling him politically by forcing Kasavubu to relieve him of his duties as prime minister. As this backfired, and the ensuing political crisis got worse, they nudged the young Mobutu to step up and take over. As mentioned above, Lumumba remained a threat, even under house arrest, but the direct plan for his assassination was conceived by the Belgian secret service<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The US plans were thwarted with the arrival of the new Special UN representative, Rajeshwar Dayal that refused to bend to Western demands, did not recognize Mobutu's coup and provided protection for Lumumba, which was placed under house arrest. His assassination was only set in motion after Lumumba escaped the compound (Schraeder 1994: 47).

The newly elected Kennedy's administration came to power in the midst of a deep crisis, as the whole world cried out in protest against Lumumba's murder. This led Kennedy to make some controversial decisions to avert the criticism. He called for the departure of Belgian troops and reconvention of the Congolese parliament. The CIA would pay off enough MPs to ensure victory for Kasavubu, supported by a nationalist prime minister Cyrille Adoula in order to keep the Lumumbist faction in check<sup>2</sup>. The wise choice to put forward Adoula, which was acceptable to most Congolese politicians, resulted in the planned outcome by itself.

Kasai was subjugated by the FP on its own, but Katanga proved too strong. Finally, after long negotiations and internal divisions within US decision-making a bold UN operation ("Grandslam") in 1962 brought the separated Katanga faction back into the fold, eliminating 'the last threat' to the Congolese state and the geopolitical balance, but not for long. The US could not wait any longer, since the dragged-on negotiations with Tshombe almost led to a take-over by the Lumumbist fraction that had started to undermine Adoula. The Congolese unification averted Soviet influence and Tshombe fled to Spain while his mercenaries crossed the border to Angola (Van Reybrouck 2010: 328-337).

At this point, the US would be committed in preserving stability in the Congo. It was a challenging task as the excluded Lumumbist factions embraced socialism and turned to armed struggle as a last resort. While the government more or less succeeded using the ANC to repress civil protests (De Witte 1996: 310), the Soviet-backed (Russian and Cuban) military challengers proved too strong. Without continued backing of the UN, Belgium, France and others, Mobutu would not have been able to defeat Pierre Mulele's Maoist-inspired rebellion in Kwilu, nor would he have won against the Simba rebels operating from Kivu. In an attempt to turn the tide against this Lumumbist-socialist rebellion, Mobutu even had to co-opt Tshombe in order to get the help of his Katangese mercenaries. This bloody civil war only ended in 1965 when the US

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<sup>2</sup> If this failed, they still had Mobutu to retake the political scene.

and Belgians entered the fray with air support (Van Reybrouck 2010: 345).

When peace was once again forcefully installed, Mobutu had no legitimacy to remain in power. Although he was not in such a weak position as before. The army had been cleared from Lumumbist or Tshombe's factions and its higher officers were loyal to Mobutu exclusively. Kasavubu retook the position of acting-president, elections were declared and Mobutu drew back to the shadows. The second free elections since independence turned out to be an enormous victory for Tshombe and his new party CONACO (Convention National Congolaise) with 122 of the 167 seats in parliament (Young 1984: 729). Kasavubu felt threatened by his former rival and repeated his move from 1960, by replacing Tshombe with Evariste Kimba as Prime Minister (Van Reybrouck 2010: 348). This time Mobutu was ready to step in for good.

A military coup by the ANC high command was announced on 25<sup>th</sup> November 1965. This time, Mobutu himself would take up the position of president for five years. Colonel Leonard Mulamba became the new prime minister. The high command legitimized their coup in the traditional way that they did so in order to save the nation. The CIA supported it, favouring a strongman-approach to infighting politicians that could refuel the rebellion. After the five-year transition period had passed, Mobutu still firmly controlled the government. On 4<sup>th</sup> October 1973 he addressed the UN General Assembly with the stability-mantra:

“The situation which we have experienced from 1960 to 1965 was cruel for our people. And we must recognize that anarchy, chaos, disorder, negligence, and incompetence were master in Zaire. Some of you look in the dictionary perhaps to understand the definition of the word ‘anarchy’, while in Zaire we have experienced it so thoroughly that many thought the word ‘anarchy’ was a Zairean invention.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Quote from *Études Zairoises*, September-October 1973, 2, 79-102. (Young 1984: 730)

In an evaluation of the First Republic, Young states that the ANC exaggerated the scope of the disorder, putting the blame on the politicians and pushing for further de-politicization. It is true that many Congolese experienced some repercussions in their personal lives, but major economic enterprises continued to work, schools continued to function. Yet Young argues that “[...] disorder was fatally lodged in the arteries of the system. [...] This is why, in its unanimous acclamation of the New Regime, parliament was faithfully representing its constituents. The First Republic passed into history as a distasteful period [...] (Young 1984: 731). Mobutu’s rise to power was welcomed by the masses, which had been effectively excluded, especially when the MNC was set aside. The former government was composed of quarrelling elites (*évolués*), which became its immediate beneficiaries (Naniuzeyi 1999: 678-9). At the time of the November coup, the masses expected a radical change in their socio-economic conditions. Of course Mobutu would quickly disappoint, but at the time his popularity with the masses helped him to step up and take over (Naniuzeyi 1999: 679).

### **Personal rule**

This time Mobutu did not hesitate to monopolize power and turn Congo into a personal regime. His legacy would have a lasting influence on the country, more even than colonial rule. The political black-earth methods he used to stay in power, would pave the way for new personal regimes after his protracted fall after the Cold War. This paper will analyse his rule through the prism of regime theories to describe its most important characteristics. A short look at the regime structure according to the typology of Hadenius & Teorell and Geddes in combination with the Bueno de Mesquita’s selective theory will explain how Mobutu eradicated internal threats. Even while Mobutu’s position was directly linked with the Western support, he was able to erode their influence over decades despite the endemic state weakness that would only increase.

But first things first; what constitutes a personal regime? Ezrow and Frantz highlight its main characteristics: “Personal

dictatorships are regimes in which a single individual controls politics. [...] one person dominates the military, state apparatus and ruling party (if one exists). No autonomous institutions exist independent of the leader. [...] Personal dictators rule with extreme freedom, allowing for eccentric policies.” (Ezrow, Frantz 2011: Chapter 11). They “[...] handpick a group of individuals to assist them in governing often referred to as the personal clique. These individuals are typically friends or family members of the leader. The balance of power between the leader and the clique is tilted significantly in the leader’s favor: as such, personalist dictators face few checks on their power” (Ezrow, Frantz 2011: Chapter 11).

The murder of Lumumba proves that Mobutu did not hesitate to step over bodies to secure his position. Even when he did not execute his former friend himself at that time, his share in the murder cannot be denied. At the beginning of the coup, Mobutu swiftly wanted to get rid of his other challengers. His two-track approach of repression and selected patronage quickly allowed him to dominate the political scene. His first victims were the last Prime Minister, Evariste Kimba, and three other important figures from the First Republic<sup>4</sup>. After the show trial of the so-called Pentecost conspiracy, all four were hanged publicly in a main square of Léopoldville. The victims were lured into a trap by a bunch of officers, loyal to Mobutu but pretending to prepare a coup against him. None of the victims had undertaken any steps to prepare such a move. None of the soldiers were prosecuted (Van Reybrouck 2010: 356).

Those who got the message before could not wait to get out of Mobutu’s way. Immediately after the *coup*, Tshombe left for Spain, but even in exile he remained a threat for the usurper. Even there he could not escape Mobutu’s schemes: in 1967 a dodgy French businessman lured him to Ibiza for a relaxing weekend. En route, the Frenchman hijacked the plane and forced it to land in

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<sup>4</sup> The other victims were former Minister of Defense, Jérôme Anany, former Minister of Land Policy, Alexandre Mahamba (a Lumumbist), and Emmanuel Bamba, former Finance Minister and a fervent adherent of Kimbanguism that could potentially mobilize his fellow religious followers (Van Reybrouck 2010: 356, Poppe 2011: 57).

Algiers. Tshombe was arrested, but his extradition to Congo was prevented by De Gaulle. Anyhow, he died in mysterious circumstances in his cell two years later, officially from a heart attack (Van Reybrouck 2010: 357-8). Kasavubu on the other hand, suddenly decided that he wanted to retire from politics and moved back to his home village in Bas-Congo. He died of natural causes four years later (Van Reybrouck 2010: 357). Someone that however did not notice these warning signs was Pierre Mulele, the former rebel leader from Kwilu that fled to Brazzaville after his insurrection failed in 1964. Mobutu promised him amnesty and a position in the new government, but when he arrived in Kinshasa he was used as a brutal example for future challengers of the regime. Mulele was horribly tortured and executed in public (Haskin 2005: 40).

In the east of Congo, however, there were still small pockets of resistance. The ANC was still weak and tribally divided, so Mobutu relied on white mercenaries to do the job. By the end of 1967 they succeeded in expulsing the last Simbas and their leaders Soumialot and Gbenye from the Kivu. Only Laurent Kabila was able to maintain a small foothold on the shore of Lake Tanganyika, but no longer presented a threat (Van Reybrouck 2010: 361).

The only threat to stability were the Katangese Tigers, or Tshombe's gendarmes that had fought bitterly to defend Katanga's short-lived independence. When the Simba rebellion threatened national security, they were co-opted together with their leader, Tshombe. Their help was crucial in stopping the Simba advance. They rebelled twice. First when Tshombe announced he would return from Spain. Only a mix of negotiation and military action could stabilize the situation. A part of the soldiers and their families were granted amnesty, a promise Mobutu did not break, the rest was forced once more to leave Congo, and crossed the border to Angola once again, where they would play an active role in the Angolan civil war (Haskin 2005: 39-41).

The second time, a part of the hirelings, led by Major Jean Schramme, a former Belgian plantation owner, turned against Mobutu in order to 'save the Congo' after they learnt that Tshombe's plane had been hijacked, and even shortly occupied Stanleyville and

Bukavu. As always, Washington's support in the form of three C-130 with a contingent of 150 US soldiers was already underway. Even when Congress pressure forced President Johnson to redraw the order, one plane stayed behind until the crisis was over (Schraeder 1994: 74-80). The mercenaries quickly drew back to the Kivu province and afterwards were negotiated safe conduct to Rwanda by the Red Cross (Haskin 2005: 40).

After ridding the country of all former political and military opposition, Mobutu turned on his army supporters to wriggle all political power from their hands. His only real support at the time of the coup was from the high general staff of the ANC. They were his only electorate: according to Bueno de Mesquita that is the group "whose endowments include the qualities or characteristics institutionally required to choose the government's leadership and necessary for gaining access to private benefits doled out by the government's leadership" (Russet 2011: 15.) Mobutu knew his electorate was too small to co-opt other segments of society, much needed to stay in control. In order to weaken their influence, and broaden the pool of collaborators he decided to launch his own party, the 'Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution' (MPR). He deliberately refrained from including many military officers in the government or administrative functions (Young 1984: 731), but created a military-one party regime (Hadenius & Teorell 2007) in which both organs would be controlled by himself, the *Président-Fondateur*.

The larger electorate made it possible for him to rotate loyal followers between various political posts, allowing some 'their turn to eat,' while degrading others. This system of patronage gave Mobutu all the strings, playing out his clients against each other. In order to do so, he reformed the whole political system. He wrote a new constitution so he would be "[...] solely responsible for the appointment and dismissal of all cabinet members, the provincial governors, and all judges. The constitution called for compulsory military service. It was submitted to ratification by a popular referendum in June 1967 and was reportedly approved by 98 percent of the population" (Haskin 2005: 42). The MPR was to be extended to all significant segments of society, not unlike a totalitarian regime.



“At the centre, effective power was concentrated in the office of the president. (...) Generously endowed with government funds and vehicles, the party extended its structure throughout the country in the months that followed. There quickly appeared jurisdictional conflicts between the administrative and party representatives at different echelons of government, leading to a decision in October 1967 to fuse at each level the party and administrative responsibilities. The MPR role was extended to all organizational sectors: unions, youth and student organization were converted into party organs, and cells were established in Catholic seminaries and army units.” (Young 1984: 732).

Mobutu’s regime did not become totalitarian, as his nationalist ideology would wither in face of the economic crisis of 1974 (Van Reybrouck 2010: 362). If one links the developments on Zaire’s domestic scene with the international dimension, the case of Zaire proves J. Tolstrup’s findings that political elites are key players in influencing their international relations, and that democratization can be successfully stalled on both levels in some cases. Mobutu’s regime, truly personal in nature, can be understood to have more agency in reassessing the country’s linkage compared to other regime types. If Mobutu had not succeeded in monopolizing power for himself, he would not have been able to maximize selected relations with the West without facing open Congolese dissent from key support groups.

By 1965 it was clear that Mobutu was the golden boy in Washington’s eyes. Even when they frowned upon his internal repression, he offered them a stable bastion that would ward off all communist influence to Congo. This is a clear shift since 1960: the US took over from Belgium in their responsibility to maintain stability. The US-Zaire special relationship already provided Mobutu with the largest US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in Africa, and doted it as well with small, but effective military programs (\$3-4 mln annually to train Zairian military personal) in

addition to the support for Zaire's purchase of six C-130s, which would be maintained with US military aid (Schraeder 1994: 80f.). Mobutu would strengthen this linkage over the years by using his personal contacts to draw foreign direct investment in his developing mining sector.

### **Eroding linkage: the tail that wags the dog**

**Social Linkage.** The white population had definitely been reduced since independence. In 1960, when the Thysville mutiny broke out, 30.000 Belgians crossed the river to Brazzaville or flew back to Brussels. In three weeks about 10.000 public officials, 13.000 employees from the private sector and 8000 colonists (plantation owners) left the Congo (Van Reybrouck 2010: 307). Afterwards the Congo crisis evolved into full scale war with the Simbas, who in their last struggles targeted the white population, killing over a hundred in Kisangani, before fleeing off to the bush. The only area in Congo, where foreigners were not harassed during the crisis, was Katanga. Its mining sector heavily relied on their know-how and technical assistance. And Tshombe, when still in charge, envisioned a slow cooperative route to full independence that would not disturb economic progress. Social linkage with the West remained strongest in Katanga, which explained how Tshombe was able to smoothly run the secessionist republic, attract funds and successfully organize its defence against attacks from the ANC.

When the Katangese secession was finally defeated 1964, Congo's provinces were split into mini-provinces by Kasavubu to subject them to more central control. After Mobutu took over he undid this decision, appointing loyal cronies to directly control 8 provinces and changing Katanga's name into the degrading – Shaba. However, over the years, economic mismanagement, étatisation and growing insecurity made many settlers decide to move away. Benjamin Rubbers estimated their total around 1500 (of which 850 Belgians) in 2004 (Rubbers 2009). It is clear that even before these numbers were never high enough to mitigate any form of Belgian or Western influence on Congolese politics. Quite the reverse actually,

as Mobutu used the lives of foreign nationals to demand military assistance during the Shaba wars (Cf. footnote 7, below).

**Communication Linkage.** As a journalist, Mobutu very well understood the power of the media. Directly after the *coup*, he sent young Congolese to Paris to learn how to make television. A year later, on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1966 the first Zairian state channel was launched; in 1967 the first broadcasts in Lingala started. The country would have colour TV long before many parts of Eastern Europe (Van Reybrouck 2010: 354f.). Propaganda was a key aspect of Mobutu's power in the early years. It promoted his policy of "authenticité" or "Zairization" actively banning Western influence to spread national consciousness, and helped foster his personal cult. As Mobutu build out national television networks by himself and for himself, there was complete censorship and no foreign influence, and therefore no linkage with the West.

**Transnational Civic Society linkage.** The only player Mobutu was not able to root out by force was the Catholic Church. While all other forms of civil society (trade unions, women's organizations and youth movements) were incorporated in the 'Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution' (MPR), the President-Fondateur could not co-opt, nor violently repress this organization, in fear of losing his Western support. He did, however, succeed in sowing division and limiting its influence, especially on education. Mission schools were forced to have a native principal, crucifixes were burnt. Saints were replaced by ancestors, young priests in education had to join the MPR youth movement. Christian youth organizations were banned, Christmas became a working day, etc. (Van Reybrouck 2010: 375).

Insofar Mobutu's 'Cultural Revolution' succeeded the main challenge were the bishops that proved to be fierce critics of his regime. After forcing Cardinal J. Malula in exile in 1972, the president's divide-and-rule strategy proved successful to ward of Western influence:

"In the early 1970's, President Mobutu sought to rein in the power of the church by nationalizing church schools and

hospitals, and in the ensuing conflict, Cardinal Joseph Malula was driven briefly into exile before a compromise was reached with the regime. In general, however, church leadership rarely confronted the Mobutu regime despite its brutality, severe corruption and gross mismanagement of the economy. According to Patrick Boyle, a professor at Loyola University Chicago, the ethnic, personal and ecclesiastical divisions among the bishops diminished the church's capacity to take a prophetic stance and played into the hands of the regime. For most of the 1970's and 1980's, the bishops were too divided to serve as a unified voice of opposition" (Longman 2001).

**Economical Linkage.** While the Zairian economy initially boomed due to the high copper prices, drawing foreign investments and loans, its dependency on the mining sector, low differentiation of export commodities, and pure mismanagement contained all the seeds for economic collapse. Already in 1967 the Mobutu's regime searched for new avenues of profit to siphon off funds directly to the state treasury, that is, to his broad electorate (army officials, loyal party members and kin), nationalizing the biggest mining firm (Union Minière), renaming it Gécomin. To strengthen his economic policy, Mobutu also launched a new currency – the Zaïre.

When the war in Vietnam ended, the price of copper plummeted. In combination with the oil crisis the Zairian economy started stagnating in 1974. Using his high political profile to borrow from Western bank to overcome this "temporary setback" drowned Zaire in debt. With US and French intervention Mobutu was able to obtain more financial injections, some debt alleviation and much rescheduling (Young 1983: 116-120). As the doors to private banks one-by-one closed, Mobutu unexpectedly ruptured diplomatic relations with Israel (its former ally) and declared solidarity with the Arab cause at a UN meeting in order to gain access to Arab banks. The US was shocked of this unannounced *volte-face*, but took no action (Schraeder 1994: 82).

When finally the IMF became involved, they tried to bring Mobutu to financial accountability in 1976. The few austerity

measures, which Mobutu allowed, mostly affected the population. Due to the fall of food imports, reports of starvation appeared already in 1979. By then it was too late: a report by the Economist Intelligence Unit in 1978 disclosed:

“[...] the real value of imports has fallen by some 45 percent (since 1972). In these circumstances, the scope for general austerity seems very limited indeed. It is a source of wonder that supposedly responsible people can, without any apparent awareness of inconsistency, both condemn the violation of human rights in Zaire and insist on economic policies that can only be imposed by terror” (Young 1983: 122).

Soon the IMF stopped caring about the hundreds of million dollars owed to private banks, but concentrated to return the Zairian economy as a reliable participant in international trade. This proved to be an impossible task. Mobutu and his cronies had patronized all lucrative trade dealings, in which both parties (Zairian and foreigner) transferred abroad as many of their liquid assets as possible as no side trusted to invest in the Zairian economy. Development programs were passed on to loyal clients, who corruptly squandered the funds with no chance of economic return (Young 1983: 14-129).

In the end, while aid was allocated to Mobutu half-heartedly, debt-repayment and structural adjustment sank to a level of mere symbolic exchange. The Zairian people drew back from the public sphere to the “second economy” (black market) in order to survive. Mobutu knew that his patrons in the West would not cut the umbilical cord, as there was no alternative to his regime. As Young (1983: 125) stated: “External actors were in a curious position, they could neither afford to see Mobutu fall, nor could they afford to see him fail.”

**Geopolitical Linkage.** This was without doubt the most important form of linkage for the regime. As the crisis situations of the 1960s no longer required direct US presidential attention, Mobutu strengthened his personal contacts with the CIA and Defence Department. Moreover, during the presidency of D’Estaing, he

sought better ties with France, a more reliable and active partner on the African continent. Belgium by then was no longer an important player. Its Military Technical Assistance remained constant during the Mobutu years (mostly providing training and equipment for the FAZ)<sup>5</sup> and this was not influenced by the fickle political relationship. Even on occasions it might have been, Mobutu would personally interfere “to file of the sharp edges”. Belgium’s interventionist reflex, however, had been put aside after 1965 and would not play an important role for Zaire’s geopolitical position, besides legitimizing the regime (Vanthemsche 2007: 257-260).

Formally, US and French interests in Africa only seemed complementary during the Cold War. The US aimed to keep Russian and Cuban leverage at bay and even tried to ‘roll back’ Soviet advancement altogether at times. On the other hand, France was not preoccupied with ideological issues, but first of all sought to consolidate and promote their influence in their former colonies and other French-speaking African countries. France was very protective of its former colonies and more lenient towards leftist regimes in its *chasse gardée* as long as their loyalty to Paris was guaranteed. While this led to a direct clash of French and US policies in Africa at times<sup>6</sup>, Mobutu found it easy to use this tension to convince Paris to establish better ties with Zaire, especially as France had perceived Mobutu to be a US puppet and a potential threat to its influence in Central Africa (Schraeder 2000, 398-400).

During the Angolan Crisis in 1974, a pivotal moment in the African Cold War, Mobutu was still able to bully the US for more support and aid:

“In an effort to shock the White House into reassessing the value of US-Zairian ties and making policy more consistent

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<sup>5</sup> Some Belgian officers were included as advisors in Mobutu’s inner circle, for example Colonel Louis Marlière (Vanthemsche 2007: 259).

<sup>6</sup> Benin, Congo-Brazzaville and Madagascar are clear examples when French protégés turned Marxist, but did not lose support of France. Another case of US-French friction was when the US decided to support Guinea after it had defected from French orbit during Sékou Touré rule.

throughout the executive branch, Mobutu on June 19, 1975, accused Washington of plotting his overthrow, declared Ambassador Hinton *persona non grata*, and arrested the majority of the CIA's contract Zairian agents. [...] Ford and Kissinger quickly sought to repair the breach with Mobutu” (Schraeder 1994: 58).

By the time of the first Shaba war (March-May 1977) Mobutu could no longer afford such bold moves. The US refused to get involved when Angolan rebels (The Katangese Tigers – former troops of Tshombe) crossed the border with Zaire and started rapidly taking control over cities in Katanga. At the time, Mobutu’s troops proved to be worthless against this small (2000 rebels), but disciplined group. However, by then he could rely on France (and later Belgium) to come to his aid<sup>7</sup>. France did not have important economical stakes in the conflict, but considered Zaire a strategic reserve. After the rebels’ second attempt (May 1978), France even set up an African-led peacekeeping force to discourage them from trying again. Allocating this task to Mobutu’s undisciplined and plundering FAZ would have brought instability to the province and scared off the white population, needed to keep the mines running (Zartman 1989).

## **Conclusion**

During his rise, Mobutu was successful in eroding Belgian’s linkage and tying its faith with that of the US. As Zaire’s geopolitical and economical linkage with the US was firmly established, Mobutu actively started pursuing different patrons, especially France. By the time the Cold War ended and his geopolitical capital melted as snow in the sun, all other forms of linkage had also weakened to such a degree that none of his formal allies could nudge him out of power.

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<sup>7</sup> During the Shaba II, Mobutu ordered the execution of 30 whites in Kolwezi. He successfully framed the Katangese tigers and instantly received support from French legionnaires and Belgian paratroopers (Van Reybrouck 2010: 394-395).

In face of democratic opposition after 1990, an isolated Mobutu blew hot and cold, but without doubt stayed on top of the transition process. The only exception was his fear for excommunication after he crushed a religiously-led pacifist manifestation with napalm, killing more than 35 people on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1991, which temporarily forced him to agree to reforms (Van Reybrouck 2010: 426-247). All the opposition's attempts to gain access to political power were reversed. With only his loyal presidential guard, well paid, trained and armed, he was able to maintain control of Kinshasa. Mobutu no longer needed the FAZ.

When the genocide broke out in Rwanda on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1994, France offered Mobutu a last straw to grab, in order to pursue its own interests. After 1989, US-French rivalry had gained new momentum. France saw the US supported emergence of Yuwiri Museveni and Paul Kagame's Rwandan Patriotic Front as victories of Anglo-Saxon influence in Central Africa. Less than three weeks after the start of the genocide, Paris sent two envoys to Mobutu to feel him out on French intervention in Rwanda. In exchange for letting France reassert its waning influence in Central Africa, Mobutu was "rehabilitated" to the rest of the Western World with French references<sup>8</sup>. In the words of Guy Labertit: "France committed a major political mistake by clinging to the myth of Mobutu even after his regime had lost all coherence" (Whitney 1997). The same could have been said about the US.

Mobutu had managed to transform the very weakness of Zaire into an asset for the survival of his regime. He has astutely sustained the "Mobutu or chaos" thesis, which unfailingly brought Western powers to his rescue when push finally came to shove. The more enfeebled the regime, the more "Mobutu or chaos" became a live issue (Young 1986: 130). The above analysis of Zaire's linkage and leverage leads to an interesting observation – while Mobutu's vulnerability to external pressure (leverage) theoretically should have increased as Zaire only resembled the shell of a state – its economy had completely collapsed and been corrupted to the core; its army

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<sup>8</sup> Insights from Journalist Mark Huband (McKinney 1994).



was worthless; and after the Cold War, Mobutu became an international embarrassment for the West, with no alternative sources of support – Mobutu’s regime was still able to block all attempts to circumvent his power, both from the West as from within. Zaire is a clear case that not only a personal gatekeeper regime can effectively restrain foreign linkage, but even use its own state weakness to turn this linkage against its patrons, in fact forcing them to support its client and even aiding him in removing challengers. In order to do so, the regime had skinned linkage to pure geopolitics and dismantled all institutions or actors that could challenge Mobutu’s patronage of this linkage. The author hopes that this analysis might influence our thinking about the power of state weakness.

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