

# The Congo's Independence Struggle Viewed Fifty Years Later

Herbert Weiss

In the cacophony of what has been referred to in broad terms as “The Congo Crisis,” some misrepresentations have been repeated again and again. This commentary therefore will not attempt a comprehensive analysis of the Congo’s struggle and achievement of independence; instead it will focus on aspects that can be given a new or revised interpretation. It will consider five themes where misrepresentation has had significant effects: (1) Belgian policy on the education of elites; (2) the supposed “violence” associated with the nationalist drive to independence; (3) Belgium’s decision to accept a dramatically condensed decolonization process; (4) Belgian miscalculations in this process; and (5) the price of haste.

## The Education of Elites

Much of the commentary regarding Belgian colonial policy is rooted in the horrors of the Congo Free State. But when the Belgian state took over responsibility for the Congo, it developed a set of administrative policies that were strict but not notably more harsh than those of other colonial powers, especially in central and southern Africa. The biggest difference was in its policy toward Congolese elites. Belgium followed neither the British policy of indirect rule nor the French policy of elite higher education

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and assimilation. In other words, traditional leaders were given very limited roles and powers. Indeed, the “modern” elite was limited to a few high school graduates who were given very low professional responsibilities; university graduates did not appear until the mid-1950s. There was one critically important exception to this policy—promotion within the Catholic Church. The first Congolese priest was ordained 1917; by 1960 about three thousand Congolese had attended seminaries and more than five hundred were active priests of various grades. A seminary education involved rigorous intellectual training including the study of Latin and Greek. From a purely intellectual viewpoint, these three thousand Congolese had received an education that was certainly superior to an average American B.A., and that put the Congo comparatively quite high in any African colonial education index.

Despite these facts, the story that the Congo only had sixteen university graduates at independence has been frequently repeated, giving a very false impression. It is of course true that there were only a handful of secular university graduates, and at independence there were no Congolese medical doctors, lawyers, or engineers. Nonetheless, there were thousands of intellectually trained individuals who did to some extent fill the need for “modern” or “Westernized” role models—albeit as priests or former seminary students. There did indeed remain questions about the relevance of their training for directing government services, but the human intellectual infrastructure was there.

An additional problem at independence, however, was that the largely white, Belgian leadership of the Catholic Church forbade Congolese priests—the more than five hundred Abbés—from accepting any political or administrative roles. Thus some of the most respected individuals were prevented from leading the population during the independence struggle and immediately thereafter. However, many of the seminary students who did not for one reason or another take the priestly vows did become political leaders; these included such important actors as Joseph Kasavubu, Antoine Gizenga, and Cléophas Kamitatu. The biggest problem was that such individuals had been allowed to hold only low positions in the administrative hierarchy; they therefore lacked the practical experience needed for directing a bureaucracy that they were called upon to lead immediately on the exodus of the Belgian civil servants.

## The Independence Struggle

The Congolese independence struggle has been described by some as anarchic and violent. In fact, with a few specific exceptions—most notably the Lulua–Luba conflict in Kasai Province, which did become violent—the period before independence was overwhelmingly nonviolent. Of course violence did occur with the mutiny of the *Force Publique* four days after sovereignty was transferred. But, one has to ask, who was responsible for the

failure to promote some Congolese soldiers to officer rank prior to independence? And why did a virtual civil war break out in Katanga between southern Lunda connected groups (CONAKAT and its political allies) and the northern Luba (BALUBAKAT and its allies), again *after* independence? Was that not a consequence of the Belgian support for Katanga secession, despite the fact that more than half the Katangan voters had supported political parties that strongly opposed such a move?

In sum, to blame the Congolese independence struggle for employing violence on a broad scale is unjustified and unfair

### **Belgian Acceptance of Immediate Independence**

Why did Belgium agree to give up its control of the Congo with relatively little effort to counter Congolese demands for independence? To answer this question one has to go back to the very beginning of the Belgian Congo. Unlike the other colonial powers that participated in the scramble for Africa, the Belgians had no imperial history; it was their king, Leopold II, acting autonomously, who had imperial ambitions and who established the Congo Free State, which was legally a separate domain from Belgium. Leopold's brutal rule over the Congolese inspired an international public opinion campaign against the atrocities committed by his agents. It was under these circumstances that the Belgian state finally—and somewhat reluctantly—accepted their king's "gift": the Congo. From then on, this relative lack of interest continued—with the important exception of those Belgian groups that had direct involvement in the Congo. Essentially, that amounted to the Colonial Administration, the concessionary companies that often acted as states within the state-colony, and the Catholic Church. In Belgium itself, the Belgian public, the press, and the Belgian Parliament were told that everything in the Congo was under control and that the Congolese were happy subjects. It was only in January 1959 when the Leopoldville riots erupted that Belgians in Belgium became aware that all was not running smoothly in the Congo. This created a substantial divide between the metropole and the colony. The Belgians in the metropole were not sufficiently attached to the role of colonial masters to be willing to make sacrifices to remain there. Their attitude seemed to be "if they don't want us we'll leave, since we were there for their own good."

Apart from the Leopoldville riots, 1959 was also a year when France continued its uphill military effort to maintain its rule over Algeria. The Belgian political class on the whole agreed that the Algerian example was to be avoided at all costs. Had it been attempted, such a policy, of engaging in a war to retain Belgian colonial presence in the Congo, would have been rejected by a substantial part of the Belgian Parliament and by metropole public opinion.

There was a second development in 1958–59 that had a serious impact on Belgian policy. In an August 1958 speech in Brazzaville—just across the

Stanley Pool (now Malebo Pool) from Leopoldville (now Kinshasa), the Congolese administrative capital—President de Gaulle had offered independence to all French sub-Saharan colonies in Africa. With this offer, France sought to undermine the more nationalist and more radical political parties in its African possessions, and this policy succeeded overwhelmingly. In the referendum that followed, only one colony—Guinea—actually opted for full independence; all the others adopted a formula that allowed France to retain most of its economic, political, and military interests in these new states. In addition, France reinforced its voting power in international organizations because it now had the likely support of some fifteen new states.

Clearly, despite (or because of) the fact that the Congo Free State was constructed by the use of massive violence, Belgium was now very reluctant to resort to military repression: it sought, at all costs, to avoid an Algeria-like war. Instead, with the prospect, indeed expectation, of an independent Congo ruled by moderate Belgium-friendly rulers, it adopted the French sub-Saharan model. In sum, a strategy of acceding to Congolese demands for independence seemed a pathway worth pursuing. This meant supporting “moderate” political parties and developing plans for a relatively rapid devolution of power. Such plans envisioned sovereignty being transferred in about five years, possibly with the head of state remaining the King of the Belgians. That is indeed where things stood at the end of 1959.

### **Belgian Miscalculations**

However, Belgian leaders badly miscalculated what was about to happen. First, in some parts of the colony—most intensively in the Bakongo area west of Leopoldville—colonial administration collapsed, as most government services (judicial tribunals, regulated markets, medical services, and many others) were boycotted. Second, recently permitted and formed political parties gained much popular support and were therefore able to exert great pressure on Belgian leaders. The Belgian government’s response was to invite representatives from all Congolese political forces and Belgian parliamentarians to come together in a grand conference in Brussels that would discuss the Congo’s future. This conference—*La Table Ronde Belgo-Congolaise*—convened in January 1960. It is fair to state that most Belgian representatives expected the Congolese to manifest the many divisions that were assumed to exist among them. But to everyone’s surprise, the Congolese representatives were able to form a common front and to demand immediate independence. In fact, it could be argued that the Belgian representatives were more divided than the Congolese on the issue of the date of independence, since the Socialists adopted positions that were relatively close to those of the Congolese. It was under these circumstances that it was agreed that sovereignty would be transferred on June 30, 1960—just four short months later.

The result of the conference amounted to a great triumph for Congolese leaders and the independence struggle. In December 1959 some of these leaders were so suspicious of Belgian intentions that some of them were sent abroad so that if the struggle became violent they would be able to form a government in exile (thus showing the influence of the Algerian example again, but this time from a Congolese perspective). Now, two months later, victory had been achieved.

Of course, the unity of the Congolese leaders would not last, especially because a national election was scheduled to be held in May 1960. Indeed, the electoral campaign began immediately upon the delegates' return to the Congo from Brussels and their united front dissolved into competing political parties, marking their shift from nationalist negotiations to electoral politics.

The electoral campaign revealed another unwelcome surprise for Belgian leaders but also for many of the more moderate Congolese leaders. The mood of ordinary Congolese was anything but passive or moderate. On the contrary, in key areas of the Congo the citizens, especially those in rural areas, manifested a virtually revolutionary spirit once they realized that the stringent constraints of the Belgian colonial system had in fact been lifted. In sum, the typical political leader was a member of what can be described as the "modern elite," and he was eager to achieve independence and to prove that the administrative system could be run just as well by Congolese as it was by Belgians. But in many areas the typical follower had a far more radical agenda; he wanted the oppressively paternalistic system to be destroyed. In addition, there was widespread belief that the Belgian departure would lead to a bonanza of recuperated wealth. In some areas, villagers no longer sowed seeds in the expectation that immediately after independence they would all receive tractors!

The electoral effect of this mood was reflected in the success of the more radical parties, those that described themselves as the "nationalists," and in the almost complete failure of the parties that had been helped by the Belgian administration. It was this pattern that resulted in Patrice Lumumba's party achieving the largest bloc of votes in the newly formed Parliament and his being elected Prime Minister. Yet again, the Belgian assumptions and expectations had failed to materialize.

Nonetheless, there were openings for Belgian interests. First, the key nationalist leaders were absent from the important Economic Round Table that followed the political one; they were naturally busy running their electoral campaigns. For Belgian economic interests the economic conference was of course of prime interest, and they faced not the top Congolese leadership but deputies with limited influence; some of those sent to represent Congolese interests at this conference were young university graduates. It was here that early contacts were made between Belgian economic and political interests and what became the core of the "Binza Group" of young Congolese political actors who soon became the members of the College

des Commissaires that ran the country after Joseph-Désiré Mobutu “neutralized” Lumumba and Kasavubu in September 1960. It was also at the Economic Round Table that links between some Belgian interests and certain south Katanga leaders were developed and strengthened, resulting in the Katangese leaders’ predilection for secession.

### The Price of Haste

In the months between the Round Table Conference and June 30 the hectic speed with which important political decisions were taken—indeed, had to be taken—resulted in giving Belgium initiatives that had a profound impact on the immediate postindependence period and prevented Congolese leaders from undertaking a multitude of tasks that badly needed to be dealt with.

The constitution, the “Loi Fondamentale” by which the Congo was to be governed, more or less followed the decisions of the Round Table Conference, but it was a document that the Belgian Parliament passed. One result was that it gave the Belgian government the initiative as to who would be asked to form a government. Despite the fact that Lumumba and his allies had won the largest number of seats in the new Parliament, Belgian antipathy for him resulted in an attempt to find another leader for the post. Although this attempt failed, it made Lumumba even more suspicious of Belgian motives than before, and significantly soured him on future Belgo-Congolese relations.

A stalemate developed over the formation of the Katanga provincial government. This was “resolved” in formal terms by June 30, when the Belgian Parliament passed an amendment to the Loi Fondamentale that permitted the pro-Belgian CONAKAT party led by Moïse Tshombe to form a government. It was this government that declared the province independent eleven days after independence. But the Katanga conflict developed into a costly provincial civil war.

Perhaps the biggest cost of the haste with which the transfer of sovereignty occurred was that nothing was done to Africanize the colonial army, the Force Publique. This had the disastrous consequence that four days after June 30 practically the entire army mutinied. This was immediately followed, in turn, by the panicked exodus of virtually all Belgian civil servants, leaving behind empty “ministries” with no knowledgeable persons ready or able to fill the many abandoned posts.

Even this catastrophe was perhaps not the very worst effect of the lightning achievement of independence. In West Africa, independence struggles took many years to achieve their goal. During that time Africans typically felt they had to unite in order to confront the colonizer as one united movement, and in most West African states the nationalist forces united into one political party *before* independence was achieved. In the Congo, however, there was no time for this process to unfold. At independence,

therefore, the Congolese were divided into a multitude of political parties. "Unity," if that is what one can call it, was achieved only years after independence and then under the dictatorial rule of President Mobutu. True, dictatorships developed in other African countries as well, but not after these societies were almost destroyed by army mutiny, secession, the presence of a substantial U.N. peacekeeping force, and mass support for a revolutionary movement that conquered half the country. Other countries had seen one or another of these events, but the Congo was unique in experiencing them all at virtually the same time.

I was a personal witness of the events described above. I remember the sense of infectious elation I felt when the results of the Round Table Conference were announced. Now, fifty years later, I wonder what the fate of the Congo would have been if the Belgians had resisted the demand for "immediate independence" and held on for a few more years. At the time I would have condemned such a question as supporting imperialism, but with hindsight, and given the agonies that followed the achievement of independence in the Congo, I suspect that in the end the Congolese would ultimately have been far better off. By the end of 1959 there was no going back to the old policies of the colonial administration. But had a realistic transitional period been imposed or negotiated, the Congolese leadership would, perhaps, have been able to channel the energy mobilized for the goal of independence to further broader objectives: to define their common goals, to gain experience in higher administrative positions, and to bring the sergeants and corporals of the Force Publique into the the spirit of the independence struggle. Of course, this would have necessitated rapid advancement in both the Force Publique and the administration. Surely, some Belgian political and economic forces would still have attempted to split Katanga away from a united Congo. Surely, Cold War external manipulations would still have affected the process. But would they not have met a stronger, more united, and more aware Congolese response?