

The Republic of Congo

From stalled transition to intractable crises

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The Republic of Congo is experiencing a multidimensional crisis. Against the backdrop of a growing economic meltdown and approaching term limits, President Denis Sassou Nguesso embarked on a self-serving constitutional reform process. This process, which was sold by the Presidential Majority as necessary for institutional renewal, altered age and term limits, allowing Sassou Nguesso to run and win re-election, and ensured the continuity of the regime. The intractable political crisis that ensued has worsened with every successive electoral contest.

Key points

- ▶ Congo's interwoven political and economic crises result from governance deficiencies associated with the dynamics of regime durability.
- ▶ Countering political dissent through coercion, co-optation and associated forms of patronage ensures the regime short-term survival without resolving the deep-seated causes of political discontent.
- ▶ Combat between government and 'ninja' militia in the Pool region was a manifestation of political rivalry that added a humanitarian layer to Congo's crises.
- ▶ The erosion of trust within Congo's political space necessitates third party mediation to address the multifaceted challenges that imperil medium-term stability.

Introduction

The Republic of Congo was poised to embark on a political transition as President Denis Sassou Nguesso approached the end of his second seven-year term.¹ Instead, a self-serving constitutional revision, approved by referendum in October 2015, plunged the country into an intractable and complex crisis. The new constitution that allowed Sassou Nguesso to seek and win re-election in March 2016 continued the logic of institutional manipulation to ensure the continuity of the regime, despite its deleterious political, social and economic implications.

Congo's political crisis has been grafted onto an already dire socio-economic condition. After enjoying years of oil-dependent economic growth – while simultaneously benefiting from debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative – by 2015, the Republic of the Congo was once again facing a moderate to severe risk of debt distress.²

From US\$2.4 billion in 2010, Congo's debt stock almost quadrupled to US\$9.1 billion in 2017. Over 39% of this debt was incurred as new concessional borrowing from China.³ By August 2017, the International Monetary Fund announced that Congo's external debt had risen to over 110% of GDP.⁴

Sassou Nguesso wove the party, the military and workers' unions into a monolithic governance apparatus that ensured authoritarian administrative control over society

External shocks caused by declining commodity prices have proven particularly crippling for an economy largely dependent on natural resources. Poor economic management accompanied by unsustainable government spending on infrastructure projects has done little to either address chronic poverty and inequality or ameliorate public service delivery. Ballooning domestic payment arrears accruing from outstanding state pensions and student stipends also reveal growing social vulnerability on two ends of the demographic spectrum – youth and retirees.

Despite anticipation that new offshore fields would reach full production by 2018,⁵ corruption,⁶ rentier dynamics and lack of the political will⁷ to promote public accountability and drive robust economic diversification into non-oil sectors will continue to pose long-term structural challenges to economic recovery in Congo.

The political economy underlying the longevity of the regime has created an enabling environment for social crises to emerge and spiral out of control. Job losses due to the economic downturn and the shutdown of some industries have added to already troubling unemployment figures,⁸ with devastating implications for different forms of social violence.

Congo's resulting impasse has generated political mobilisation and political fragmentation, as regime proponents and opponents position and reposition themselves in uncertain times.⁹

The regime's arbitrary deployment of coercion has led to human rights excesses that have been documented nationally and internationally.¹⁰ Recourse to repression has eroded the regime's ability to build the kind of consensus necessary for effective governance and has stymied possibilities for constructive dialogue.

Congo's troubled history of state construction provides a synoptic analytical background from which to understand the dynamics that undergird the current crises. By tracing the strategies Sassou Nguesso's regime deploys to control political outcomes, there is a clear history of mechanisms designed to undergird regime longevity. The deployment of regime durability strategies in the face of multidimensional crises is unsustainable. It is this impasse which informs the crosscutting recommendations for a viable strategy to exit the crisis.

A troubled history of state construction

Since Congo gained independence from France in 1960, President Denis Sassou Nguesso has governed the country for 34 years. Political parties, labour movements and students' unions have played pivotal roles in highly unstable processes of state construction. However, it was the dominance of the military in Congo's politics that culminated in the country's first coup d'état in 1968. The historical interaction of these social actors provides the prism through which to understand Congo's current crises.

Between independence in 1960 and 1979, when Sassou Nguesso first came to power, processes of state construction were largely shaped by union-led popular uprisings, coups d'état and counter-coups.

Fulbert Youlou, Congo's independence president, instrumentalised ethnic divisions along a Kongo-Mbochi binary,¹¹ in order to institutionalise the one-party state and expand presidential powers in a context of economic decline. He was ousted during the '*Trois Glorieuses*' revolution. This revolution, which took place over three days in August 1963, highlighted the importance of labour unions in driving political change during the process of state construction. The army acted as arbiter between the revolutionaries and Youlou-loyalists.

From 1963 to 1979, Congo moved decisively towards rapprochement with the communist bloc internationally, while nationally entrenching the one-party state. After

succeeding Youlou, Alphonse Massamba-Debat launched the National Movement for the Revolution (MNR) and nationalised the water, electricity and public transport sectors under the ideological banner of 'scientific socialism'.

Massamba-Debat's creation of militia within the youth wing of the MNR antagonised the Congolese armed forces. He was overthrown in a bloodless coup by Captain Marien Ngouabi in 1968. Ngouabi's accession to power marked the military's shift from arbiter in political struggles to central player. As Congo's first military leader, Ngouabi founded the Congolese Labour Party (PCT) and brought the party's political bureau, the council of ministers and the army under his control. He was assassinated in 1977.

Joachim Yhombi-Opango briefly succeeded Ngouabi, taking the helm of the party's military committee. Yhombi-Opango was ejected in an internal PCT contest that opposed his wing of the party to that of Sassou Nguesso, in what was more of a personality struggle than an ideological contest that lasted until 1979.

Upon taking power in 1979, Sassou Nguesso continued many of the policies Ngouabi had launched. He wove the single party, the military and workers' unions into a monolithic governance apparatus that ensured authoritarian administrative control over society.

He also built complex international relations based on historical ties with France and ideological affinities with East Germany, Russia and regional ally, Angola. The end of the Cold War, however, altered the international calculus upon which Sassou Nguesso's foreign policy rested, and shook the monolithic apparatus which provided the basis for governance in Congo.

Despite the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1990, the structure and nature of the contemporary Congolese state remains inalienably linked to the post-independence dynamics of state construction.

From political transition to civil war

Congo's abundant oil and iron ore reserves, governed through a composite monolithic polity, determined the emergence of a rentier political economy extremely vulnerable to external shocks. The end of the Cold War and dipping oil prices provided the perfect storm, pushing Congo's external debt from approximately US\$3 billion in 1985 to US\$5.25 billion in 1989.¹²

This led the government to accept a socially adverse structural adjustment package negotiated with international financial institutions.

The resulting socio-political contestation led by labour unions, internal PCT rivals and a re-emergent political opposition destroyed the one-party state monolith, necessitating the reconfiguration of the state, with changing roles for political parties, the army and trade unions.

A national conference that assembled 1 500 participants in Brazzaville, from 25 February to 10 June 1991, was central to state reconfiguration. The broadly consensual national conference represented a symbolic and institutional break with the past.

A new democratic constitution was debated, drafted and adopted by referendum on 15 March 1992. Symbolically, the country's name, flag and anthem also changed. Institutionally, Sassou Nguesso retained a ceremonial presidential role, while a transitional government was negotiated under Prime Minister Andre Milongo.

However, the 1992 constitution effectively applied a new set of rules to a political landscape still riddled with entrenched institutional sediments from the one-party era. Previous patronage patterns continued – only this time, they became a fundamental part of multiparty political practice. The ensuing dissonance between democratic norms and pseudo-democratic practice at the onset of multiparty politics evidenced formative pains.

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Pascal Lissouba of the Pan-African Union for Social Democracy (Upads) – who had served as Massamba-Debat's prime minister in the 1960s – was elected president in August 1992. However, a parliamentary alliance composed of former president Sassou Nguesso's PCT and Mayor of Brazzaville, Bernard Kolelas' MCDDI (Congolese Movement for Democracy and Integral Development) prevented Lissouba from forming an effective governing coalition.

The multiparty dispensation plunged the state into new and more resolutely violent forms of socio-political rivalry. The art of coalition building thus became a tool for governmental gridlock. At the core of contestation was the distribution of ministerial portfolios as a means to access nascent political patronage networks. Multiparty coalition-building quickly morphed into a process of rapidly shifting hybrid politico-military alliances. These alliances were largely based on regionally organised personal interests, rather than political platforms and ideology.

Despite their interdependence, the transformation of political space had occurred without an equivalent reconfiguration of the security sector. Hence prevailing interconnections between political parties, party-affiliated



POLITICAL MOBILISATION
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militias and the military made them increasingly indistinguishable.¹³ The interweaving of what ought to have been distinctive categories normalised the use of force in state formation as militias became an integral part of all major political parties.¹⁴

Following the 1992 presidential elections, Lissouba attempted to diminish his predecessor's influence in the military by creating a paramilitary group – the Ministerial Reserves (*Reserve ministerielle*).¹⁵ He also purged the upper echelons of the Congolese army of those perceived to be close to Sassou Nguesso.¹⁶ Party-affiliated militias originated from these tactics which bore similarities to Massamba-Debat's in the 1960s (see previous section).

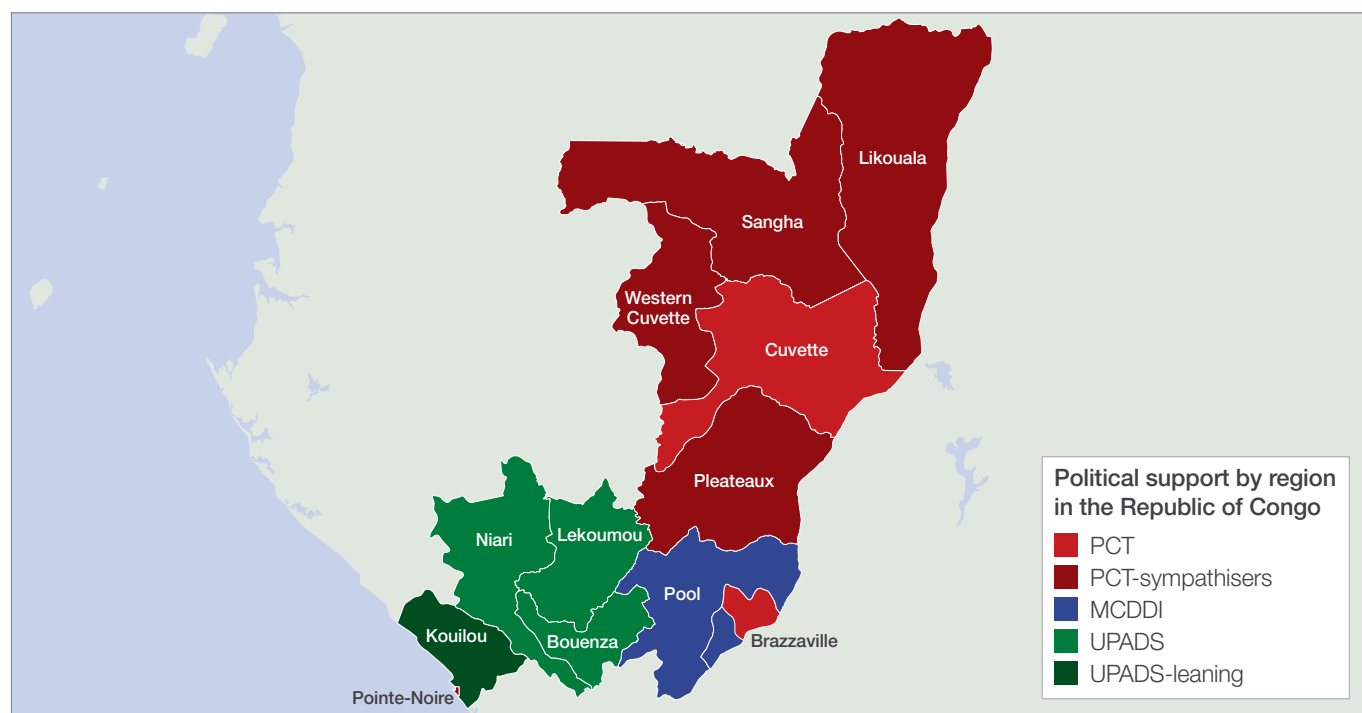
Congo's multiparty political leaders operated from regional political bases that splintered previous north-south identity binaries.¹⁷ Support for Pascal Lissouba's Upads mainly came from the south-western Niari, Bouenza and Lekoumou regions, Sassou Nguesso's PCT drew support from the northern Cuvette, Likouala and Sangha regions, and Bernard Kolelas' MCDDI support came from the south-eastern Pool and Brazzaville regions.¹⁸ As low oil price shocks persisted, Lissouba lost the fiscal margins necessary to manoeuvre the realignment of Congo's simultaneous political and economic transitions.

The regionalisation of politics in multiparty Congo, though not new, is evidence of accentuated real and imagined ethno-regional rifts that have undergirded the politicisation of ethnicity since independence. Narratives of north-south cleavages commonly caricatured in Mbochi-Kongo ethnic rivalries are often more imagined than real, since elite alliances in the pursuit and retention of power are often more personalised than collective. Nevertheless, ethnicity pervades everyday interpretations of political action.

State reconfiguration through multiparty politics clearly made Congo ungovernable. In the transition from a monolithic to a multiparty dispensation, political mobilisation increasingly became personalised, militarised and regionalised. The plurality of violent actors turned multiparty elections into arenas of fierce political contestation. The logic of force triumphed over the force of non-violent political participation in determining political outcomes.

The pursuit of power by militarised political parties replaced the military coups of the single-party era. Political violence was effectively extended from Brazzaville's neighbourhoods to the rest of the country¹⁹ leading to the outbreak of civil war on 5 June 1997, with Sassou Nguesso's Cobra militia pitted against splinters of the national army and Lissouba's Cocoye militia.

Illustrative multiparty support base mapping



Sassou Nguesso returns

Sassou Nguesso's return to power after fighting from June to October 1997 effectively scuttled Congo's second multiparty presidential elections that were due to be held in August 1997. A new constitution was again adopted by referendum on 20 January 2002, as part of the post-conflict transition. The new constitution set a seven-year presidential mandate, renewable once. In March 2002, Sassou Nguesso was elected president.

Congo's post-war constitution sought to achieve three overarching objectives. Firstly, by establishing clear term and age limits for presidential candidates,²⁰ it aimed to create a stable and democratic framework for the peaceful transfer of power from one president to another.

Secondly, by eliminating the position of prime minister and head of government, it ostensibly sought to fix the institutional conflicts inherent in the country's 1992 constitution. Concentrating power in the executive, however, limited parliamentary checks and balances, fundamentally reversing a key post-1992 democratic gain.

Finally, it provided that presidential candidates who received at least 15% of the vote were due the 'protection and advantages stipulated by law'.²¹ This was viewed as an incentive to promote politics by peaceful means, but it actually amounted to tacit institutional co-optation of the most popular opposition leaders.²² Paradoxically, these clauses, which were supposed to institutionalise peaceful political transitions in Congo, later came under assault by its main orchestrator – Sassou Nguesso.

Constitutional reform and competitive authoritarianism

Upon easily winning re-election in 2009, amid a boycott by the main opposition parties, Sassou Nguesso set out to consolidate his hold on power, despite entering his second and final term in office. He confirmed Congo as a competitive authoritarian regime in which democratic institutions exist on paper, but are subverted by incumbents.²³ Through a mix of co-optation, conciliation and coercive strategies, the Sassou Nguesso regime manufactured consensus to mimic political participation, thereby undermining democratic practice.

Legally, the constitution needed to be changed once more in order to circumvent term limits and prolong the regime's hold on power. Article 57 of the 2002

constitution stated, 'The President of the Republic is elected by direct universal suffrage for seven years. He is re-eligible once.'²⁴ Hope for a peaceful political transition in Congo was pinned on this article. An orchestrated constitutional referendum in 2015 eclipsed transitional hopes and confirmed the continuity of the regime.

While the context for the 2002 constitution was a post-conflict one, the 2015 referendum was stage-managed to ensure passage of a constitutional review eliminating age and term limits, which would have barred Sassou Nguesso from seeking re-election. Although his public argument was the need to move beyond the post-conflict constitution of 2002, Sassou Nguesso's manoeuvring reflected regional patterns of constitutional change for regime longevity in Central Africa. Constitutional reforms have consistently been tailored to the political expediency of incumbents and their political parties.

Hegemonic control of the regulatory, instrumental and operational levers of the participatory political process in Congo was essential to ensuring the survival of the regime. The simultaneous deployment of coercive instruments of state and the subjection of electoral institutions to regime controls ensured participatory outcomes that marginalised opposition forces and promoted regime longevity.

Congo, which in 1992 became the only country in the region after independence to have undergone a peaceful electoral transition of power from one president and political party to another, was thus steered away from a potential second peaceful political transition into a certain political impasse.

The absence of broad-based debate around the usefulness, substance and process of constitutional reform weakened the socio-political foundations of the state in Congo. It also put constitutional change at the epicentre of a set of strategies devised by Sassou Nguesso and his clan to extend their hold on power and perpetuate competitive authoritarian politics and policy.²⁵

Phase 1: political dialogues and manufactured consensus²⁶

The perception of democratic practice is more important to competitive yet durable authoritarian regimes than its empirical reality. So, highly controlled and stage-managed processes are meant to showcase political participation and provide a façade of legitimacy. There is

participation, there is dialogue, there is voting – yet the opacity of the process guarantees neither transparency, freedom nor democracy.²⁷

Political dialogues became the strategy of choice for manufacturing consensus in order to provide legitimacy for a regime doubtful of its real political clout. Carefully orchestrated and stage-managed political dialogues took place successively in Ewo (December 2011); Dolisie (March 2013); Sibiti (July 2015)²⁸ and Ouessou (March 2017).

Each of these political dialogues was supposed to build consensus among political leaders, civil society and representatives of religious groups for planning and organising peaceful elections. However, after participating in Ewo 2011, the opposition successively boycotted Dolisie 2013 and Ouessou 2017. They viewed political dialogues as arenas designed for collusion and manufacturing consensus around Sassou Nguesso's agenda to stay in power.

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Ewo 2011 was supposed to lay the groundwork for the 2012 parliamentary elections. This political dialogue, which saw broad-based participation, reached a credible consensus for the reform of electoral governance. The perennial issue of poor electoral governance had led to the main opposition boycott of the 2009 presidential elections.

Participants at Ewo 2011 agreed to three main sets of reforms to restore electoral integrity in Congo.

Firstly, they agreed to introduce biometric voting and clean up electoral registers in a process that would include the participation of civil society representatives. Secondly, it was recommended that an independent national elections commission replace the existing National Commission for the Organisation of Elections (Conel). Thirdly, they recommended the publication of the election calendars in a timely fashion, to allow for adequate planning and mobilisation by political parties.

The three main bodies organising, tallying and publishing election results – the Ministry of Interior and Decentralisation, the General Directorate for Electoral Affairs, and Conel – are controlled by the state, nullifying any claims to independence. Lack of public media access for opposition candidates; disproportional access by ruling PCT candidates to state resources for campaign purposes and inconsistent voter registers, all suppressed voter participation.

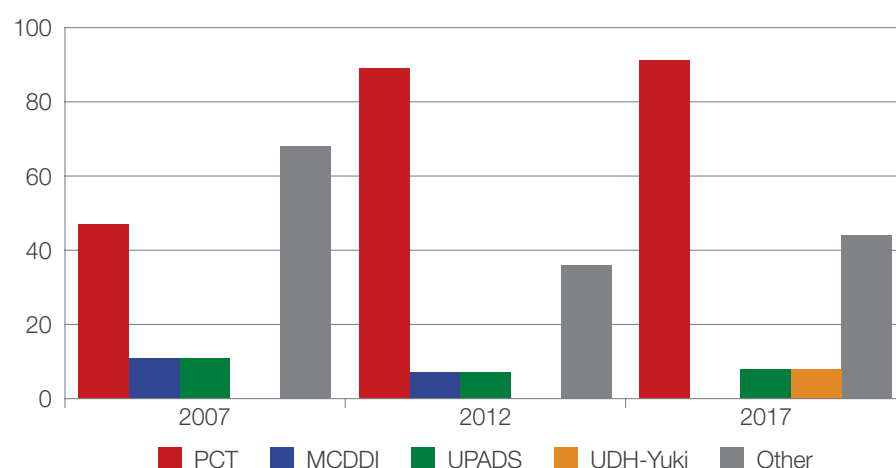
It was obviously not in the interest of regime survival to implement these reforms and they were never operationalised. The 2012 parliamentary elections permitted the ruling PCT and its allies²⁹ to extend and consolidate their majority in the legislature.



POLITICAL DIALOGUES
BECAME THE STRATEGY
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This constellation of PCT and allied political parties formed the Presidential Majority (RPM). With the RPM controlling over 100 of the 136 seats in parliament, they effectively set up an institutional bulwark against any potential legislative checks on the executive. The complete control of the legislature and executive by the RPM rendered the prospect of any subsequent political transitions in Congo inauspicious. Also noteworthy is that the main opposition parties – the MCDDI and Upads – lost four seats each in 2012 that they had held in 2007.

Figure 1: Parliamentary change 2007–2017-12-05



Source: ISS data

The president's son and daughter won parliamentary seats for the PCT in the Cuvette region and Brazzaville respectively. These elections confirmed Denis-Christel Sassou Nguesso's ambition to use a parliamentary political career to eventually launch a bid to succeed his father.

Phase 2: manufacturing consensus and opposition boycotts

Failure to implement the recommendations from Ewo 2011 that led major opposition parties to boycott the talks at Dolisie 2013. The conference, which was organised ostensibly to improve electoral governance in preparation for local elections, was viewed with some cynicism. According to the leader of the Congolese Social Democratic Party (PSDC), Clement Mierassa, this was because electoral governance reforms agreed to at Ewo had not been implemented and there was no indication from the government that they were interested in ensuring transparency in the electoral process.³⁰

By controlling the venue, timing or agenda of these political dialogues, the Presidential Majority also largely determined their outcomes. Subcommittees, often chaired by PCT party members or allies from within the Presidential Majority, ensured PCT-favourable decisions and recommendations. Ostensibly designed to foster peaceful engagement, political dialogues became an arena for manufacturing consent to ensure the durability of the regime.

By Sibiti 2015, the consensus towards electoral reforms that was developed in Ewo 2011 had given way to entrenched political polarisation, forcing the majority of opposition parties into a boycott. Sibiti 2015's agenda aimed for

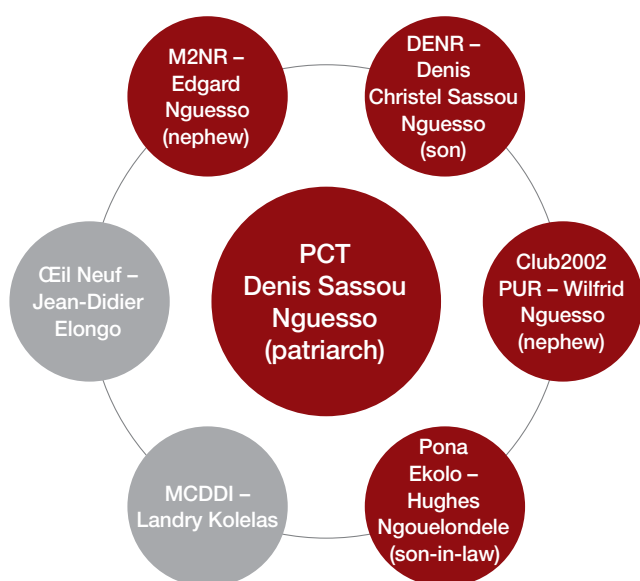


SASSOU NGUESSO'S
FAMILY MEMBERS
ARE ANGLING FOR
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SUCCESSION

consensus around ‘electoral governance and institutional reform’ – which was a subterfuge for pushing the constitutional reform that would allow Sassou Nguesso to extend his stay in power.

While the Sibiti 2015 consensus group agreed to proceed with constitutional reform, the composition of this platform importantly points to the interplay between the presidential family and political organisations in manufacturing consensus.

Figure 2: Sibiti 2015 Consensus Group³¹



The decision to put constitutional reform to a referendum was taken in the absence of Congo’s main opposition parties. Figure 2 represents the main parties which reached consensus in favour of constitutional reform at Sibiti 2015.

The political and civil society organisations shown in red are all controlled by members of the presidential family. Thus, the consensus around constitutional reform was essentially a family process. This hardly constitutes a solid basis for the kind of state reconfiguration proposed for the reform of the constitution.

Sibiti 2015 exemplified manufactured consensus stage-managed by and for the Presidential Majority to impel an unpopular political action. The manoeuvring that led to the constitutional referendum occurred across the Congo’s interconnected political and social landscape, with implications for every subsequent electoral episode. Even within Sassou Nguesso’s family, it created potential intra-family fault lines in the eventual battle for presidential succession.

Political divisions around the question of constitutional reform fragmented the ruling PCT party, splintering Congo’s political landscape and concretising a political crisis. As the Sassou Nguesso regime’s support base increasingly became confined to the president’s relatives and political allies, complementary strategies were needed to maintain the grip on power.

The political consequences of constitutional reform

Regime continuity and political succession

Political succession is an important part of regime continuity. A dynastic allure permeates the politics of regime longevity in Congo, with Sassou Nguesso’s family members emerging as central players. Family members are not only essential to sustaining entrenched regimes, but they are also important for the continuity of a regime across generational lines. Hence the covert and overt positioning of family members into strategic spots that make them eligible for presidential succession.

A dynastic allure permeates the politics of regime longevity in Congo

Positioning for dynastic political succession within the presidential family has produced two camps – the ‘securocrats’ and ‘plutocrats’. Among the securocrats with suspected presidential ambitions are Edgard Nguesso, Sassou Nguesso’s nephew and director of presidential affairs (DDP) and Admiral Jean-Dominique Okemba, head of the National Security Council. Functioning within the security establishment necessitates discretion in the pursuit of political power, though both remain important economic players in the hotel and banking sectors respectively.³² Edgard Nguesso is closely tied to the National Movement for the New Republic (M2NR).

The main figures from the plutocratic camp include Denis-Christel Sassou Nguesso, PCT parliamentarian for Oyo (Cuvette) and Jean-Jacques Bouya, PCT parliamentarian for Tchikapika (Cuvette). Both are members of the PCT’s powerful Political Bureau. The former is also director at the Congolese National Petroleum Corporation (SNPC), founding president of the Fondation Perspective d’Avenir (FPA) and leader of the New Republic Dynamic (DENR) political platform.

There is also already an official twitter support committee account @DCSN_2021.

Meanwhile Bouya is also minister of planning and major projects. Plutocrats are important economic players in the energy, audio-visual, banking and educational sectors. Denis-Christel Sassou Nguesso's foundation is perceived as a socio-political campaign tool. Despite signing financially beneficial agreements with several government ministries, the FPA maintains that it merely provides scholarships, vocational and entrepreneurial training to the underprivileged.³³

While all these individuals currently defer to and essentially support and promote the current Sassou Nguesso regime, they also represent competing constellations in the orbit of post-Sassou Nguesso political succession. They are networked, to varying degrees, into the economic and security establishments, forming groupings which are likely to perceive presidential succession in zero-sum terms. Each has access to, and the support of, political, economic and military operators whom they would be willing and able to leverage to that end.

Multilevel fragmentation and political crisis

The adoption of the new constitution in the referendum of 25 November 2015 set Congo up for the most tenuous and sustained political contestation since the end of the civil war. The new constitution shortened the presidential term from seven to five years, and shifted term limits from two to three terms. It eliminated the presidential age ceiling, allowing 72-year-old Sassou Nguesso (after over 31 years in power) to stand for re-election on 20 March 2016.

The first and most obvious level of political fragmentation occurred between the RPM and opposition political parties. Battle lines were drawn by groups which saw the referendum as a coup amounting to authoritarian consolidation in Congo through an orchestrated constitutional reform process.³⁴ To them, it ushered Congo into a phase of institutionalised illegality and illegitimacy.³⁵ The hard-line opposition organised around the platform of Frocad (Republican Front for the Respect of Constitutional Order and Democratic Change).

The Presidential Majority presented the constitutional reform project as an inevitable part of Congo's democratic consolidation which did not devolve from

any single individual's desire to capture the institutions of state.³⁶ Between these poles, shrinking political space meant that the moderate/republican opposition had limited room for manoeuvre. They faced the stark choice between co-optation into the Presidential Majority, or coercion by joining the Frocad platform.

Shrinking political space meant that the moderate/republican opposition had limited room for manoeuvre

The second level of fragmentation occurred within the Presidential Majority itself. In the run-up to the constitutional referendum, leading RPM allies such as Guy Brice Parfait Kolelas' MCDDI faction and Claudine Munari's Movement for Unity, Solidarity and Labour (Must) sided with Frocad against constitutional change. The MCDDI faction led by Euloge Landry Kolelas favoured constitutional change. In August 2015 both Parfait Kolelas and Munari lost their ministerial portfolios in a cabinet reshuffle, while Landry Kolelas made his ministerial debut in a blatant divide-and-conquer move.

The ruling PCT also fragmented, with the CADD (Action Committee for the Defence of Democracy) refusing to back the constitutional reform process. The CADD, founded by Andre Okombi Salissa in 1993, militarily and politically backed Sassou Nguesso's return to power. This fracture marked the significance of discord at the PCT's nerve centre – the Political Bureau – where Okombi Salissa was a member. He subsequently founded the IDC (Initiative for Democracy in Congo) which aligned with Frocad, creating the IDC-Frocad.

Another influential PCT Political Bureau member, former presidential adviser and minister of defence from 2009 to 2012, Charles Zacharie Bowao,³⁷ also came out against the constitutional change. For this, he faced a party disciplinary committee and later became a founding member of IDC-Frocad.³⁸

Subsequently IDC-Frocad became the strongest voice against constitutional reform and continues to provide the most significant political opposition to Sassou Nguesso's project of regime continuity.

A fourth dimension of fragmentation occurred within Congo's political opposition and civil society. Within

Congo's highly fluid political landscape, opposition political parties were not immune to splintering, whether or not as a result of pressures from the ruling PCT. However, patronage was at the core of opposition political figures who rallied to the Presidential Majority, as personalised rational choices trumped broader considerations of political crisis avoidance in their choice for constitutional reform.

Mobilisation amid political crisis

Beyond political parties, social movements also actively engaged with the constitutional reform process. As the constitutional reform battle lines were drawn, social movements formed into two mainly youth-based camps. *Sassoufit* – that's enough – and *Sassoui* – Sassou, yes – punned the president's name into campaign metaphors for political change and continuity respectively. A clear division emerged between youth advocates for political change (who were described as militant youth) and youth proponents for the status quo (who were described as opportunistic and manipulated youth).³⁹

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Sassoui (those for continuity) mobilised under four main associative platforms, one of which was *Pona Ekolo*, ('for my country' in Lingala) coordinated by Elvis Tsalissan Okombi and presided over by Sassou Nguesso's son-in-law, Hughes Ngouelondélé (PCT-Plateaux). Launched in March 2015, *Pona Ekolo* justified its support for constitutional reform in order to transform institutions, asserting that this was necessary to readapt them to evolving political contexts.⁴⁰

Pona Ekolo, through its leadership, straddles political party, administrative and civil society spaces, to give the impression of broad-based, pluralised, representative consensus.⁴¹

Pona Ekolo was among the civil society representatives within the Sibiti 2015 consensus group. As the leader of the 'centre' political party, Tsalissan Okombi is also vice president of the Independent National Elections Commission (Ceni), which replaced the Conel. He became minister in the first government after Sassou Nguesso's re-election in 2016. Combining political party, civil society, election organising and ministerial functions exhibits the kind of centralisation of responsibilities in the hands of loyalists that sustains regime longevity.

The *#sassoufit* (enough) platform organised national and international activists, initially around a call to boycott the referendum, and subsequently around the 'No' vote. *Ras-le-bol* (Fed Up) was the major national partner of the *#sassoufit* platform. It organised as a politically active socio-cultural youth movement challenging the Sassou Nguesso regime on issues of corruption, transparency, the rule of law and economic mismanagement.⁴²



THE NEW CONSTITUTION
INCREASED PRESIDENTIAL
TERM LIMITS FROM 2 TO
3 TERMS

Ras-le-bol argues that after over 55 years of independence, the governing regime, which has ruled for over 32 years, has not developed the requisite processes for the establishment of a just and equitable society.⁴³ As a group of militant youth committed to peaceful change, they stand opposed to injustice, corruption and violence in Congo.

Internationally, *#sassoufit*, led by Paris-based Congolese political activist, Andrea Ngombet, developed a complex media platform based on new information and communication technologies to campaign against constitutional change.⁴⁴ It simultaneously organised protest marches in front of Congo's Embassy in France and in front of French corporations with close ties to the Sassou Nguesso regime.

Another facet of their operations lay in exposing illicit financial transactions by Sassou Nguesso regime officials. *#Sassoufit* did this by providing financial and material support to activists in Congo⁴⁵ in their investigative endeavours. They also facilitated temporary asylum processes for activists who felt threatened.

Differing social mobilisation strategies

These two camps continued the historical polarisation of Brazzaville. *Pona Ekolo* mainly organised in the city's northern fifth and sixth districts – Ouenze and Talangai respectively; and *Ras-le-bol* was based in the southern Bacongo and Makelekele districts.⁴⁶

Politically motivated social movements also reflect regional power networks. *Pona Ekolo*'s and M2NR's support for constitutional reform is tied to their leaders' regime connections. Hughes Ngouelondélé backs *Pona Ekolo*'s Tsalissan Okombi from the Plateaux region; and Edgard Nguesso supports M2NR's Paul Tchigouamba from Pointe Noire.⁴⁷

Financially backed through their connection to the Presidential Majority, *Pona Ekolo* and M2NR fanned out and organised pro-constitutional reform marches, mainly in Brazzaville's northern districts as well as in selected central and northern regions of the country.

Meanwhile *Ras-le-bol* was intimidated out of its original base of operations in Ouenze, after being accused of supporting an anti-northern political agenda, given their *sassoufit* stance.⁴⁸ Their requests to organise and hold public demonstrations were often denied by the authorities.

Ras-le-bol exists due to a loophole in Congo's associative law which grants them de facto existence,

despite having yet to receive official recognition from the administrative authorities. Non-recognition by the authorities limits their ability to raise funds to support their civic engagement activities. Official hostility to the group is captured in the statement of a police chief to a youth activist that 'given the lengths to which 'they' had gone to return to power, they would never yield to youth demands to cede power a second time'.⁴⁹

Given Congo's consistent history of election-related violence, overtures for peace from the Presidential Majority rang hollow in the face of their persistent stonewalling on electoral governance reform. The failure of successive political dialogues to engender much-needed electoral reform in Congolese politics imperils the emergence of a non-violent political culture that privileges the force of political argument over the deployment of violence to resolve political discord.

The regime responds to a multidimensional crisis

Since regimes strategically engage with politically and socially organised opponents, regime responses to political crises contribute to their escalation or de-escalation. Congo's new republic, resulting from the stage-managed 2015 constitutional referendum, undermined political discourse to reveal fault lines between the regime and its opponents as well as within the regime itself.

The challenge for the regime's longevity, therefore, lies in the strategies developed and deployed to maintain itself in power until the next presidential elections in 2021. Shrinking public revenue due to an economic crisis has narrowed the regime's capacity to govern through patronage networks and privileged recourse to coercion and associated forms of low-cost quotidian insecurity.

These are drawn from an historical repertoire of strategies perfected under the one-party state. Such strategies, deployed by elites in states like Congo, exhibit contradictions between the short-term security of the regime and the long-term goal of state construction.⁵⁰

The return of the national security state

Sassou Nguesso's first round electoral victory was contested by his main opponents. These opponents, mainly from the IDC-Frocad-CJ3M platform, had signed a Victory Charter on 29 February 2016. This Charter enshrined two commitments. The signatories promised

to unite against Sassou Nguesso in the event that the presidential elections went into the second round. Secondly, they vowed not to recognise Sassou Nguesso's victory, if the elections were rigged.⁵¹

By pulling off a contested first-round victory, Sassou Nguesso left the signatories to the 'Victory Charter' flat-footed, given their political miscalculation that the elections would go to a second round in the worst-case scenario. The regime then responded to contestation by citing national security concerns to justify the individual and collective harassment and intimidation of opponents.

The arrest and detention of political opponents and their aides became the prime intimidation strategy in Congo. These arrests have largely taken place under national security justifications. Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko and Andre Okombi Salissa, who were placed third and fourth respectively in the official results of March 2016 presidential elections, refused to acknowledge Sassou Nguesso's victory. They were arrested and remain jailed pending trial for allegedly posing threats to national security.

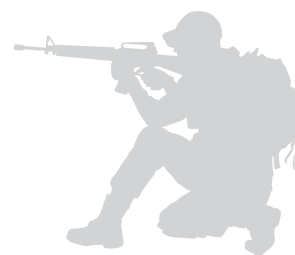
Shrinking public revenue due to an economic crisis has narrowed the regime's capacity to govern through patronage networks

Meanwhile, Guy Brice Parfait Kolelas, a signatory to the Victory Charter and who came second in the presidential elections, recognised Sassou Nguesso's victory after his claims against electoral irregularities were thrown out by Congo's constitutional court. His recognition stunningly coincided with the beginning of April 2016 government military operations in the Pool region. This region provides the operational base for the Ninja militia. It is also the area from where Parfait Kolelas hails.

The Ninjas, a militia group which had fought against Sassou Nguesso from 1997 to 2003, launched attacks on administrative buildings in the southern districts of Brazzaville in the early hours of 4 April 2016, shortly after the election results were announced. These attacks provided justification for the government to respond militarily.

The message from the regime in Brazzaville is very clear. It will not hesitate to deploy the full weight of coercive state machinery to curb all forms of political dissidence that pose existential threats to its hold on power. However, while the regime has focused on controlling unarmed opposition political figures and youth activists, it has surrendered its monopoly on violence by acquiescing to the creation of non-state militia groups favourable to the regime.

After the March 2016 presidential elections, Aimé Hydevvert Mouagni, a parliamentarian and leader of the regime-aligned Reality and Perspective Club (CPR), appeared on national television with his black-clad militia, the Republican Patriotic and Defence Platform (PPDR). He read a statement calling for a popular uprising against opposition leaders who, he claimed, were seeking a non-democratic route to power.



NON-STATE MILITIA GROUPS FAVOURABLE TO THE REGIME HAVE BEEN ALLOWED TO OPERATE

The Presidential Majority condoned such intimidation in the public domain. These militias maintain a latent presence that poses long-term security threats in Congo. The presence of multiple militias currently affiliated with different PCT barons also points to the continued militarisation of politics.

The deployment of the 'national security' argument in practice exhibits subjectivities where non-violent regime opponents are forcefully repressed, while potentially lethal supporters of the regime who pose a threat to civic order are presented as posing no threat to national security. The suppression of the first, and virtual state imprimatur for the second, is an inversion which exacerbates the fragility of the state and contributes to deepening insecurity in Congo.

Patronage and state capture

Patronage models, finessed by the Presidential Majority through decades of one-party state governance, gave them the edge in the deployment of clientelistic strategies to counter the mobilisation of opponents to constitutional reform.

Euloge Landry Kolelas was not the only opposition leader who got a ministerial appointment in 2015 in exchange for supporting the constitutional reform process and fragmenting the MCDDI party. Other members of opposition parties and civil society groups were also enticed into signing onto the Presidential Majority's constitutional reform project.

When Sassou Nguesso finally decided to replace the Conel with the Ceni to run the March 2016 presidential elections, he stacked it with loyalists. Not only was the head of Conel, Henri Bouka, maintained to lead the Ceni. Among those given leadership roles in the Ceni were Elvis Tsalissan Okombi, representing the political centre, and Cephass Ewangui (head of pro-government human right civil society platform Fecodho), representing civil society as third and fourth vice presidents respectively.

Therefore, the straddling of political space by pro-government political parties and civil society organisations is not innocuous. It feeds into a deliberate strategy of limiting pluralism and producing manufactured consent by deploying regime loyalists to fulfil crosscutting regime preservation functions.

Social violence as control

The unwillingness of the state to apply law and order legislation impartially to maintain peace creates a

contentious environment where each component of society – including the ruling elite or regime – competes to preserve and protect its own well-being. The existence of social violence, despite the coercive capacity of the state in Congo, indicates the regime's tolerance for low-level conflict that undermines human security and is intimidating in effect – while never allowing this to develop in a manner which might pose a threat to the regime itself.

Media outlets in Congo have documented social violence phenomena known as *les bébés-noirs* (juvenile crime syndicates) and more organised non-state groups such as *les douze apôtres* (armed pro-government vigilante groups).⁵² The juvenile crime syndicates and the pro-government paramilitary groups are central in the production of everyday insecurity in Brazzaville.

Juvenile crime syndicates and paramilitary groups are central to everyday insecurity in Brazzaville

The juvenile crime syndicates are tolerated by the regime in power because low-level insecurity provides the regime with an excuse for repressive and arbitrary violation of civil liberties, especially among restive youth.⁵³ The *bébés-noirs* are crime syndicates whose often-drugged juveniles circulate through the city under cover of darkness, armed with machetes and randomly attack residents.

This phenomenon developed in the aftermath of the constitutional referendum, and while linkages are not being drawn between the political and the criminal, it is impossible to disagree with the assessment that the situation was tacitly tolerated by state authorities. The position is widely echoed by youth activists, who cannot understand the incongruity between the prevalence of low-level insecurity and the impressive security measures deployed to protect the regime.⁵⁴

Adding to this assessment, one political leader noted that the juvenile crime syndicates are part of the destabilising political and public conditions created by the Congo regime.⁵⁵

This phenomenon, which the regime's security establishment had accommodated since the end of 2015, finally captured the attention of the country's

justice system in May 2017, when it launched a campaign to rid Brazzaville of this threat to public security.⁵⁶

Meanwhile paramilitary groups such as *les douze apôtres* are clearly better financed, better organised and more sophisticatedly embedded within the regime establishment. Allegations are rife about the chains of command that link these militia groups to central regime figures and the work by human rights lawyer Maurice Massengo-Tiasse evidences their actions.

Witnesses who encountered these groups described their operational stance after both the constitutional referendum and the presidential elections. According to several eyewitnesses, they operated mainly in Brazzaville's southern districts of Baongo and Makelekele, dressed in black and arriving in unmarked pick-up trucks to mete out extrajudicial punishment to individuals perceived to be protesting against the regime.

The existence and tolerance of these paramilitary groups is significant for several reasons. Firstly, regime figures are shielded from prosecution for acts committed by these paramilitary actors. When they are confronted by the police and arrested, as was the case after the constitutional referendum, they are immediately released after high-level intervention.

Secondly, the paramilitaries create a reign of terror within a population already vulnerable to the vagaries of the *Force Publique*. By allowing certain groups of individuals to act outside the law, the rule of law in general is undermined. However, in the event of further political fracture within the regime, the absence of control over such paramilitary groups, could lead to a systemic implosion.

War as an instrument of political domination

The government launched major military operations in the Pool region to track down and bring Ninja leader, Frederic Bintsamou, alias Pasteur Ntouni, to justice after the Ninja militia group attacked government facilities in Brazzaville's southern districts in the immediate aftermath of the presidential elections in April 2016. That a military operation was launched for what should have been a routine police operation typifies the way the Sassou Nguesso regime uses war to dominate and subjugate his most ferocious opponents.⁵⁷

There are historic, symbolic and strategic dimensions to the conflict which must be grasped if the continuing opaque war in the Pool is to be fully understood. It is often referred to as the opaque war because media and humanitarian actors have been denied access to the theatre of operations to get a clear picture of what is going on.

Historically, pre-independence rivalries between Jacques Opangault (an Mbochi from Cuvette) and Fulbert Youlou (a Lari from Pool) contributed to the complex ethnicisation and regionalisation of politics in Congo. Ex-President Massamba-Debat, also Lari, was executed after the bloody coup that ousted Ngouabi and saw Sassou Nguesso (an Mbochi) rise to power.⁵⁸ Thus, the Pool region became a bastion of opposition against the Sassou Nguesso regime. During the single-party years, Bernard Kolelas led Pool's opposition.

May
2017

CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED
TO RID BRAZZAVILLE
OF JUVENILE CRIME
SYNDICATES

Symbolically, Pool provides a theatre to display the repressive force of the state. It serves as a warning to the rest of the country that the regime will brook no collective dissent. However, the tactics deployed by the *Force Publique* in Pool will have a bearing on eventual post-war accountability and possibilities for durable reconciliation.

Despite occasionally aligning with Sassou Nguesso's PCT against Lissouba's UPADS during the multiparty years, Ninja militia loyal to Kolelas fought against Sassou Nguesso's Cobra militia during the civil war in 1997. Although overt hostilities ended in 1997 and Kolelas went into exile, the Ninja, now under Pasteur Ntoumi, continued to skirmish with the *Force Publique* until they signed a peace deal in 2002.

According to the head of the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa, the military campaign in the Pool region resulted in a humanitarian crisis.⁵⁹ The conflict was conducted without any access for humanitarian convoys, as the state claims an inability to protect aid workers who venture into the area.

Despite Ntoumi serving as presidential adviser for peace and reconciliation from 2009 to 2015, genuine reconciliation between the former belligerents has definitely never taken place.

As the Pool crisis entered its second year, strategic questions began to cropping up about combat fatigue among the troops and possible exit strategy options. In the case of the Ninjas, who seemed comfortable executing a guerrilla campaign against government forces as they operated in their natural environment, it was doubtful that the elimination of Pasteur Ntoumi would bring an end to the violence.

Hence, strategically, with the opaque war in the Pool, the regime appeared to have drawn the short straw. A combination of political and security pressures within the army created fractures, evident in the arrest, in June 2017, of the director of the cabinet of the head of Congo's Republican Guard, General Nianga Mbouala Ngatsé. This has been described, by sources in Brazzaville, as evidencing infighting within the security establishment at the centre of the regime.⁶⁰

A ceasefire agreement was signed between government and Pasteur Ntoumi's representatives on 23 December 2017. Despite the ceasefire, the multiplication of such power grabs poses existential threats for a regime

which also has to contend with insurgent and political opponents. Infighting within the security establishment poses a bigger existential threat to regime durability than any of its other non-violent opponents.

Crisis exit strategies and options

Congo has confronted intractable crisis before. There are parallels between the multidimensional crisis facing Congo-Brazzaville today and the crisis that led to the national conference in 1991. The major difference is the fact that this time around, Sassou Nguesso seems to have perceived his previous exit from power as a mistake rather than a patriotic duty to the nation. However, there is clearly more at stake now for Congo and the entire Central African region than was the case in 1991.

There is clearly more at stake now for Congo and the entire Central African region than was the case in 1991

The combination of economic pressures attributable to the negative impact of low oil prices on public revenue; political instability in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon and the Central African Republic; and social contestation in Cameroon provide a more worrying backdrop than was the case in 1991. Hence possible responses ought to be equal to the task at hand.

- Defusing Congo's multidimensional crisis requires a comprehensive and interrelated package of political, economic and social approaches that would effectively contribute to the reconfiguration of the state and its relations with society.
- An internationally-mediated inclusive multitrack political dialogue is necessary to deal with the deep-seated mistrust that has built up between the regime and its opponents. The Economic Community of Central African States (Eccas) should provide the regional backbone for a hybrid African Union-United Nations dialogue process. While the governing regime has used the sovereignty argument to oppose any form of international mediation, this stance is likely to change as a function of the deteriorating economic, political and security situation in Congo.
- Any comprehensive political dialogue should envisage broad-based political participation. It should bring

together a broad spectrum of Congolese society, including representatives from political parties, civil society, traditional groups, religious groups, youth groups and business representatives. It would benefit this process if it were to take place across two tracks feeding back information, negotiation and proposals in two different Congolese cities. This would permit the inclusion of as many perspectives as possible across different leadership levels.

- In terms of content, the dialogue process should look to harmonise the constitutions of 15 March 1992, 2 January 2002 and 15 November 2015, based on lessons learned from Congo's 26 years of troubled multiparty politics. This legal work would provide the framework for the reconstruction of a social compact between the state and society. It would take into account national projects like the 'accelerated urbanisation' project put in place by Sassou Nguesso, while fine-tuning it to account for inputs from a broad section of Congo's population.
- The political process should be accompanied by the development of an economic governance framework that would institutionalise accountability, social service delivery and promote private sector entrepreneurship and investment in ways that break with the past of economic capture by regime figures. The economic diversification that has been the subject of previous economic planning has to be rethought and incorporated into economic management in order to wean Congo from its over-reliance on natural resources, such as oil and iron ore.
- The interwoven social compact should incorporate truth, justice and reconciliation in moving beyond crisis. Reference is often made to the symbolic washing of hands after the national conference of 1991 as a strong gesture by the political elite that they were leaving the past in the past. However, the past has returned with a vengeance and it would be increasingly difficult to construct a new social compact without a process to attend to 'truth, justice and reconciliation'. Whether this process ends up with different categories of amnesty can be negotiated by the Congolese people.
- Ongoing negotiations with international financial institutions should be designed to promote better political and economic governance in Congo. These

negotiations should include an option that compels all parties to a comprehensive socio-political dialogue. Short of the regime in power buying off or incarcerating all political opponents, a comprehensive dialogue process is the most viable crisis exit strategy.

However, given the current posture of the different political actors, engaging in dialogue is unlikely without concerted and relentless international effort. The information coming out of Congo, whether in reference to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the Pool region, or in its human rights record, warrants serious international attention.

Conclusion

At each subsequent legislative and local poll after re-election in 2009, the Sassou Nguesso regime increasingly captured the state, effectively recreating the one-party state to foster the continuity of the regime. Opposition parties have been reduced to cameo appearances during elections and electoral outcomes are foregone conclusions.

Congo's multidimensional – latent and manifest – crisis, kicked off by the controversial constitutional referendum of 2015, has only worsened since the presidential elections of March 2016. Regime responses to the political crisis have hardly addressed the root causes of the enduring socio-political discontent. Instead, the regime has preferred to rely on a comprehensive strategy of manufactured consensus; fragmenting political parties and civil society organisations; the coercive apparatus of the state; and extra-state paramilitary elements in a mix of collusive, co-opting and repressive strategies that have deeply polarised Congo's political landscape. Added to the political crisis is an economic crisis that has seen Congo's foreign debt ballooning.

Exit strategies would require a negotiated and consensual reconfiguration of the state and its relations to Congo's multifarious social and political communities. If this were to take place under the auspices of third-party international mediation, it would provide Congolese parties with the basis from which to build the requisite trust needed to reach a multi-staged process to exit the crisis. The current crisis represents an opportunity to consensually reconfigure Congo's bases of economic production, security sector and public accountability frameworks and practices.

Notes

- 1 Congo's 2002 post-war constitution limited the president to two seven-year terms and stipulated a 70-year-old age limit for presidential candidates. Denis Sassou Nguesso won the 2002 elections, but six major opposition parties boycotted the 2009 election which he won as well. This set up what was widely expected to be his final term in office.
- 2 IMF, *Republic of Congo: Staff Report for the 2015 Article IV Consultation*, September 2015, www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2016/12/31/Republic-of-Congo-2015-Article-IV-Consultation-Press-Release-and-Staff-Report-43284.
- 3 According to the IMF, the low-interest – 0.25% – loans from China have 20 years maturity, a five-year grace period, and are denominated in US dollars.
- 4 Congo-Brazza: La dette publique supérieure à 9 milliards de dollars, soit 110% du PIB, *Jeune Afrique*, 10 October 2017, www.jeuneafrique.com/480562/politique/congo-brazza-la-dette-publique-superieure-a-9-milliards-de-dollars-soit-110-du-pib/.
- 5 These include the Total-exploiting Moho-Nord deep offshore field which went on-stream in March 2017. It is expected to reach a production capacity of 100 000 boe/day, supplementing Eni-exploitation of Marine XII blocks (Nene-Banga and Litchendjili) offshore fields, expected to reach a capacity of 140,000 boe/day.
- 6 Public Eye, *Gunvor in Congo – Oil, cash and misappropriation: the adventures of a Swiss trader in Brazzaville*, September 2017. <https://gunvorincongo.publiceye.ch/>.
- 7 Interview with Congolese economist in Brazzaville, 6 May 2017.
- 8 According to International Labour Organisation statistics, unemployment in the Republic of Congo started an uptick from 9.9% in 2013 to 11.1% in 2015.
- 9 Interview with Congolese political adviser in Brazzaville, 29 April 2017.
- 10 See OCDH (Observatoire congolais des droits de l'homme), *Rapport annuel sur la situation des droits de l'homme 2016*, February 2017, <http://blog.ocdh.org/public/Rapport-annuel-OCDH-Final-2016.pdf>. US Department of State, *Republic of the Congo 2016 Human Rights Report*, January 2017, www.state.gov/documents/organization/265456.pdf.
- 11 R Bazenguissa-Ganga, Rester jeune au Congo-Brazzaville: violences politiques et processus de transition démocratique, *Autrepart* 2001/2 No 18, 123.
- 12 P Yengo, *La guerre civile du Congo-Brazzaville 1993-2002: Chacun aura sa part*, Paris: Khartala, 2006, 49-53. Yengo argues that Congo's economic crisis led to the imposition of a structural adjustment programme that limited the regime's distributive capacities, thus eroding the very foundations of clientelistic reproduction, exposing the first fractures in the ruling class.
- 13 Interview with an anonymous civil society activist in Brazzaville, 4 May, 2017.
- 14 See P Yengo, Congo-Brazzaville: L'«insécurisation» comme mode de gouvernance, *Alternatives Sud*. Vol. 17, 2010, 43-47; R Bazenguissa-Ganga, Les milices urbaines au Congo: La transition démocratique et la dissémination des pratiques de violence, *African Journal of Political Science*. 3:1, 1998, 52-69; E Ngodi, *Comprendre le mouvement Nsilulu et la crise politique au Congo Brazzaville*. ASC Leiden seminar paper, 2008.
- 15 R Bazenguissa-Ganga, The spread of political violence in Congo-Brazzaville, *African Affairs*, 98, 37-54. He states that the Ministerial Reserve's mainly youth political police force was trained by Israeli, South African and Congolese instructors in the Bouenza region. The MR eventually provided the base from which Lissouba's Zulu, Cocoye and Mamba militias emerged. Most adherents to MR were marginalised, military-aged males born and raised in Brazzaville and NiBouLek (Niari, Bouenza and Lékomou) regions loyal to Lissouba.
- 16 Among these were Jean-Francois Ndenguet, who is the current head of Congo's police force, and former army chief of staff Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko.
- 17 Ibid. R Bazenguissa-Ganga 2001/2.
- 18 Interview with PN in Brazzaville, 8 May 2017.
- 19 R Bazenguissa-Ganga and P Yengo, La popularisation de la violence politique au Congo, *Politique africaine*. No 73, 1999, 188.
- 20 40-years lower and 70-years upper age limits.
- 21 Constitution of the Republic of Congo, 2002.
- 22 Interview with Congolese civil society activist on March 27, 2017.
- 23 T Goodfellow, Legal manoeuvres and violence: Law making, protest and semi-authoritarianism in Uganda, *Development and Change*, 2014, 45 (4): 1-24.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Interview in Brazzaville, Congo with an anonymous academic, 27 April 2017.
- 26 Far from being linear, these phases are largely illustrative as they occurred simultaneously.
- 27 A Schedler (ed.), *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition*, Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006, 11.
- 28 RFI, Congo-Brazzaville: Les conclusions du dialogue de Sibiti remis au président, 28 July, 2017. www.rfi.fr/afrique/20150728-congo-brazzaville-conclusions-dialogue-sibiti-remis-sassou-nguessou-munari.
- 29 The PCT's allies included the Action Movement for Renewal (MAR) with four seats from the Kouilou Region; the Rally for Democracy and Social Progress with four seats from Pointe-Noire and Kouilou; the Citizen Rally (RC) with three seats from the south of Brazzaville; Club 2002 – Party for the Unity of the Republic, a party founded by Wilfrid Nguesso, the president's nephew, with one seat in Brazzaville.
- 30 Interview with Clément Miérassa in Brazzaville, 9 May 2014.
- 31 Dynamic for the Emergence of the New Republic (DENR) is led by the president's son, Denis-Christel Sassou Nguesso; Club 2002 Party for Unity and the Republic is led by the president's nephew Wilfrid Nguesso; another nephew, Edgard Nguesso, backs the National Movement for the New Republic (M2NR); the president's son-in-law, Hughues Ngouelondélé, is honorary president of the Pona Ekolo platform.

- 32 Interview with Congolese official, April 29, 2017.
- 33 Interviews with a Fondation perspectives d'avenir (FPA) representative, 5 May 2017; and a civil society activist, 3 May 2017 in Brazzaville.
- 34 P Yengo. *Congo-Brazzaville: Coup d'état constitutionnel et restauration autoritaire*, 16 November 2016, www.cetri.be/Congo-Brazzaville-Coup-d-etat?lang=fr.
- 35 Interview with Charles Zacharie Bowao in Brazzaville, 6 May 2017.
- 36 RFI, Pierre Ngollo, PCT Secretary General, interview on constitutional change, 6 August 2015. www.rfi.fr/emission/20150806-congo-brazza-pierre-ngollo-changer-constitution-consolider-democratie.
- 37 The explosion of an arms depot took place in Mpila, Brazzaville on 4 March 2012 while Bowao was minister of defence. It led to the arrest and conviction in 2014 of Colonel Marcel Ntsourou, former secretary general of Congo's National Security Council. Ntsourou eventually died in jail in February 2017 while serving a life sentence.
- 38 Interview with Charles Zacharie Bowao in Brazzaville, 6 May 2017.
- 39 Interview with KN, civil society activist in Brazzaville, 28 April 2017.
- 40 Jeune Afrique, Congo – Tsalissan Okombi: «Il faut qu'on parle de l'autre Sassou», 25 August 2016. www.jeuneafrique.com/351556/politique/congo-tsalissan-okombi-faut-quon-parle-de-lautre-sassou/.
- 41 Pona Ekolo's coordinator is also leader of the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), a political party which, while claiming to represent the political centre, mainly has PCT benefactors. Meanwhile its president, Hughes Ngouelondélé, cumulates as parliamentarian (PCT-Plateaux) and was mayor of Brazzaville until July 2017.
- 42 Focus group discussion with youth activists in Baongo, Brazzaville, 7 May 2017.
- 43 Focus group discussion with youth activists in Ouenze, Brazzaville, 5 May 2017.
- 44 Interview with Andrea Ngombet Malewa in Paris, 18 May 2017.
- 45 Interview with Andrea Ngombet Malewa in Paris, 19 May 19, 2017.
- 46 Interview with youth representative in Ouenze, Brazzaville, 6 May, 2017.
- 47 Interview with Congolese academic, 27 April 2017.
- 48 Interview with representative of *Ras-le-bol* in Brazzaville, 4 May 2017.
- 49 Interview with youth activist GD in Brazzaville, 4 May 2017.
- 50 R Jackson. Regime Security, in A Collins (ed.), *Contemporary security studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 167.
- 51 Interview with Charles Zacharie Bowao in Brazzaville, 6 May 2017.
- 52 E Ngodi, Nouvel ordre sécuritaire post-électoral au Congo Brazzaville, in *Conjoncturis* #3, 2016, 18-19.
- 53 Interview with an academic in Brazzaville, 28 April 2017.
- 54 Interview with youth activists in Brazzaville, 5 May 2017.
- 55 Interview with political analyst in Brazzaville, 8 May 2017.
- 56 RFI, Congo: une opération pour rayer le phénomène des «bébés noirs» à Brazzaville, 11 May 2017. www.rfi.fr/afrique/20170511-congo-operation-enrayer-phenomene-bebes-noirs-brazzaville.
- 57 Interview with Congolese activist in Paris, May 19, 2017.
- 58 There are approximately 37 ethnic subgroups in Congo. However, the Mbochi (of the Ngala group) and Lari (Kongo group) have since independence imagined, produced and reproduced north vs south cleavages for political ends.
- 59 RFI, Interview with Louceny Fall, head of United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA), June 8, 2017. www.rfi.fr/emission/20170608-francois-fall-onu-congo-brazzaville-pool-deplaces-droits-homme.
- 60 Telephone interview with an anonymous source in Brazzaville, 18 June 2017.

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