

The Congo Crisis, A Historical Introduction

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Mame-Penda BA: *In recent weeks, deadly fighting between the Congolese rebel group Mouvement du 23-Mars (M23) and Congolese government forces has intensified a few kilometers from Goma, in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). What is at stake in these clashes?*

Toussaint Murhula Kafarhire: First of all, it's important to understand that the Mouvement du 23-Mars has never been a Congolese rebel group. By presenting it in this way, we are mixing up the facts, confusing international public opinion, and misrepresenting the problem when we speak of a Congolese armed group. It's important that our language truly reflects the reality it expresses. A rebellion refers to an internal group that dissents and revolts against the central government. However, the so-called "rebels" of the M23 are not Congolese in origin. Like its ancestors, the Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie (RCD) and the Congrès national pour la défense du peuple (CNDP), they originate from Rwanda. They are elements of the Rwandan army sent to the DRC, armed and supported by drones from Rwanda. It's a coalition between the Rwandans and Ugandans to continue controlling the natural resources in the east of the country.

Mame-Penda Ba: *How far back do you have to go to understand what's at stake in what's happening right now in this region?*

Toussaint Murhula Kafarhire: I would say from 1990-1991, with the end of the Cold War and changes in international geopolitics. When the Cold War came to an end, the United States, which had

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been using President [Mobutu](#), realized that he had had his day and would not be able to adapt to the rising tide of neoliberalism. What's more, he was ill¹. It was therefore time to replace him with someone else, a young leader from the new generation.

These international changes in the early 1990s also led to the liberalization of political life in the Congo ([Mobutu's speech on April 24, 1990](#)). From then on, we entered a process with sub-regional and international dimensions, which is not yet over.

In 1986, there was a coup d'état in Uganda, when [Yoweri Museveni](#) came to power. He had to go through a rebellion. [Rwandan Tutsi refugees](#)², present in Uganda since the early 1960s, took part in this war to help Museveni gain power. The spoils of war had to be shared with the Tutsi allies. Thus, [Paul Kagame](#) and the Tutsis from Rwanda, considered refugees by the Ugandans at the time, became ministers in the Ugandan government until the population rose up and refused to be ruled by refugees. Museveni and Kagame then opted to regain power in Rwanda.

It should be remembered that the 1994 genocide took place against this backdrop of major geopolitical and geostrategic change. The [Rwandan civil war](#) had begun in October 1990 and, for four years, every possible form of fighting emerged: skirmishes, battles, guerrilla warfare. However, the genocide did not take place until 1994, four years after the start of the Rwandan civil war. As intellectuals or people concerned about the future of Africa, we must always ask ourselves the crucial and critical questions: why precisely did the Rwandan genocide take place in 1994?

But let's get back to Zaire (now the DRC): for seven years (1990-1997) we dithered before really moving towards a democratic regime. Seven long years of transition during which the genocide in Rwanda took place in 1994. A huge flow of Hutu refugees left Rwanda for Zaire. An estimated two million of them fled to Zaire. These refugees were not only civilians, but also members of Rwanda's ousted government. Fighters arrived with their money, weapons... and mixed with civilians in eastern Zaire, Bukavu and Goma. Kigali, led by Paul Kagame, considered that the war was not over, as those who had retreated to neighbouring countries could always reorganize and return to wage war. Kagame then entered into talks with the United Nations to request the creation of a buffer zone between Rwanda's border and the refugee camps. Faced with the inaction of the international community, he decided to invade this region of Zaire and take charge of the refugee issue himself.

In 2022, Belgian film director Thierry Michel made an excellent documentary on this subject entitled *L'empire du silence*. One scene recounts the fate of the Hutu refugees who came to Zaire. Kagame and his allies invaded Zaire and pursued them all over the country. The Hutus had to walk thousands of kilometers inside Zaire to end up in the equatorial forest, seeking refuge in the Central African Republic or Congo-Brazzaville. Most died on the way. An estimated 300,000 people were massacred or died of starvation and exhaustion during this journey.

In 1996, Kagame and Museveni invaded Zaire with a clear plan, backed by the Americans, to remove Mobutu from power and reorganize politics in the country. They placed [Laurent-Désiré Kabila](#) and a few Congolese in this rebel movement - called the Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération (AFDL) du Congo - in order to give it a local and national profile. But in reality, it was a pure foreign invasion.

Kabila was not intended to become president of Zaire after the victory in Kinshasa and the flight of Mobutu. As spokesman for the rebels and the foreign countries that invaded the Congo - and therefore the interface with the outside world, the media and the Congolese community - he took advantage of the situation to proclaim himself president as soon as he arrived in Kinshasa, taking his mentors³ by surprise. As a result, Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi found themselves faced with a fait accompli, having to quickly re-imagine a policy of reconquest, accepting Kabila as president by force. However, they made [James Kabarebe](#), a Rwandan exiled in Uganda, his Chief of Staff,

1 Mobutu suffers from a long-term illness and is often away from the country. He regularly seeks treatment in Switzerland, and when he returns, he rests in his village of Gbadolite, so the country is virtually ungoverned. But as dictator since 1965, he has had time to establish the country's institutions, with a certain loyalty from the political class who benefit from the system. As a result, the country continues to move forward, without the figure of the president really being visible.

2 Paul Kagame himself is a descendant.

3 See the 2000 documentary by French-Egyptian director Jihan El-Tahri: *L'Afrique en morceaux*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qegbugObuMg>

overseeing the entire Zairian army at the time. Similarly, all the other army chiefs were either Rwandan or Ugandan. Since then, Kagame has been trying to infiltrate Congolese institutions with his spies. Indeed, infiltrating the Congolese army is a smarter way of waging war without having to fire a single bullet, since sensitive military information is already controlled by Kigali. We're being sabotaged from within.

From May 1997 to July 1998, Kabila tried to run Zaire, which he renamed the Democratic Republic of Congo. When he learned from his secret services that his former mentors wanted to eliminate him and replace him with someone more docile - as his nationalist streak returned as soon as he took power - he refused to honor all the mining treaties he had signed; he refused to honor all the treaties on mining resources he had signed with the West when he was rebel leader - he asked his Rwandan, Ugandan and other mentors to return to their countries, expressing his gratitude to them for having helped him oust the dictator Mobutu from power and reconquer Kinshasa. They left Kinshasa to return to Rwanda on August 2, 1998. However, on arrival in Kigali, they headed back to Goma, where they proclaimed a new rebellion under the name "Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie" (RCD). This second war led to the takeover of this part of the country and lasted five years, from 1998 to 2003.

Mame-Penda BA: *What does it mean when a rebel group controls a region? Especially for the local population?*

Toussaint Murhula Kafarhire: In practical terms, they have a government and a local army that impose law and order and levy taxes on the population. The western part of the country, where the capital Kinshasa is located, has no direct relationship with the rebel-controlled eastern part (no trade, no free movement...).

In 2022, I returned to the east of the country to do some interviews: the violence in this part of the country is indescribable. I met women who had been repeatedly raped by RCD, CNDP and M23 rebels. One of them, who must have been between 70 and 72 years old at the time, told me that every woman who had been raped or abused had to dig her own grave to be buried. Mahmood Mamdani has written a book, *When Victims Become Killers*⁴, which raises the question of how victims of genocide can in turn become criminals and perpetrate so much violence on other communities.

In the Congo, 12 million people have died directly or indirectly as a result of this situation since 1990. When I met Professor [Valentin-Yves Mudimbe](#) in Chicago in 2013, he confided in me that for ten years he had dressed only in black to mourn all the victims in the east of the country.

Mame-Penda BA: *What happens next? We know that Kabila Sr. is still going to be assassinated and replaced by his son Joseph Kabila.*

Toussaint Murhula Kafarhire: Kabila Sr. was assassinated in his office on January 16, 2001, but to prevent the country descending into chaos, a consensus was reached between the Congolese and rebel parties to swiftly enthrone Joseph Kabila, son of Laurent-Désiré Kabila. Joseph Kabila represented a sort of link between national interests on the one hand, and foreign interests, both regional and international, on the other. The assassination of Kabila Sr. was investigated, but the details of his death remained unclear.

In 2001, Joseph Kabila⁵ came to power at the tender age of 29. Understandably, he was chosen to be a mere figurehead. Between 2001 and 2003, talks began to end the second bloody war. This dialogue included the main rebel groups. The rebellion had de facto balkanized the DRC. In 1996, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi formed a coalition that invaded Zaire, but in 1999 in Kisangani, DRC, a clash broke out between the Rwandan and Ugandan armies over control of the Congo's diamond mines.

4 Mamdani, M. (2020). *When Victims Become Killers*. Princeton University Press. <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paper-back/9780691192345/when-victims-become-killers>

5 Kabila Jr. underwent military training in China. He came to power with the same rebels who ousted Mobutu.

The RCD split in two: RCD-Goma, supported by Rwanda, and RCD-Kisangani, led by [Ernest Wambadia Wamba](#). Alongside them was Jean-Pierre Bemba's Mouvement de libération du Congo (MLC)⁶ backed by Uganda.

In 2003, the [Pretoria negotiations following the signing of the Sun City agreement](#) in South Africa brought all these rebel movements together in a global and inclusive settlement, with the coalition in Kinshasa running the country with four vice-presidents from different rebel groups, the political opposition and a president from the central government. So, it's no longer a government for the people, but a government for sharing the spoils.

Mame-Penda BA: *How did this government work?*

Toussaint Murhula Kafarhire: The four vice-presidents would represent the various rebel movements and unarmed opposition parties in Congo. Kabila fils would play the role of leader. The important thing for them was to be where the decisions were made, to continue securing their interests on the ground.

This government was set up to appease and silence the guns, but not to solve the basic problems of the Congolese people. On the positive side, a new constitution was drafted, put to a popular referendum in December 2005, voted on and adopted in 2006. This constitution enabled the country to hold its first democratic elections since independence. Kabila was democratically elected for a five-year term (2006-2011). With this new legitimacy, the temporary government of four vice-presidents will come to an end in 2006.

In 2011, Kabila again called elections and won a second term until 2016. But from 2015 onwards, as in many other African countries, he will seek to remain in power, but the population will violently oppose him in the streets. Many were killed in the protests.

It has to be said that we now have young people who, with all these political crises, are sufficiently politically literate. The political awareness that is gradually developing means that today's Congolese are beginning to take a close interest in politics, which was not the case under Mobutu, when this field was reserved for a small elite. Indeed, during Mobutu's dictatorship, nobody talked about politics. This, I believe, was Mobutu's inheritance from the colonial era, because during Belgian colonization, the Congolese "native" was not allowed to get involved in political issues. They were distracted by cultural, economic and social issues. That's why our political culture is a very recent thing.

To return to the electoral cycles since 2006, the elections that will bring Félix Tshisekedi to power⁷, will finally be held in 2018. However, everyone knew that he was not the winner, but that his accession to power was the result of an agreement between Tshisekedi and Kabila, a man far less radical than [Martin Fayulu](#), Kabila's real challenger. The outgoing president needed someone with whom he could maintain good relations, given his eighteen years in power and his catastrophic record. Kabila has become extremely wealthy, while the population has become enormously impoverished. On the security front, wars have continued despite the presence in the Congo since 1999 of MONUSCO and United Nations peace observers, who have never succeeded in establishing peace. Most of them, like certain Congolese politicians, have turned into dealers, selling off minerals and taking them out of the country.

Mame-Penda BA: *Why was Félix Tshisekedi the best option for Kabila Jr?*

Toussaint Murhula Kafarhire: Since the early 1980s, Étienne Tshisekedi had been Mobutu's main opponent. He was the figurehead of the Zairian opposition, and became a hero in the eyes of the Zairean population, as nobody dared to challenge Mobutu's dictatorship at the time. During the 2011 elections, Étienne Tshisekedi was Kabila's opponent, claiming that he could actually have won the elections and proclaiming himself president. Kabila placed him under house arrest. In 2017, he died

6 Jean-Pierre Bemba is the son of an economic figure and politician during Mobutu's time. He grew up with a taste for the thrill of power. He led a Ugandan-backed rebel movement. He is currently Minister of National Defense of the DRC.

7 Toussaint Kafarhire Murhula, S.J. (2021, June-July-August). *Instabilité politique et consolidation démocratique en RDC*. Congo-Afrique, 556, 563-580.

in Belgium, and Kabila refused to repatriate his body for his funeral, fearing that the return of the remains of this national hero would cast a shadow over him, at a time when he was going through a very difficult political period.

When we organized the 2018 elections, a man who emerged from nowhere, Martin Fayulu, was voted in as the opposition's sole candidate to prevent Kabila from winning fraudulently. The candidate Kabila Jr. had chosen to represent him was a straw man with little political consistency, so he was soundly defeated in the first round. Knowing that Fayulu, the likely winner of the second round of elections, was a radical who risked judging all members of the outgoing government for their abuses and illicit enrichment, Kabila decided it would be better to strike a deal with the runner-up, in this case Félix Tshisekedi, son of the historic opponent. He handed over power to him, knowing all about his father's political history and the popular legitimacy of his political party.

Mame Penda BA: *Félix Tshisekedi has just controversially won a second term in office. What is your assessment of his first term?*

Toussaint Murhula Kafarhire: As far as the elections and Tshisekedi's second term are concerned, Congo is in a bit of a daze. At the moment, nobody dares talk about the elections. Everyone is overwhelmed. Observers don't seem to understand what really happened. The Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) has invalidated 82 candidates for proven fraud. It must be said that CENI did everything it could to meet the challenge of organizing the elections on time. However, analysts say that with a divided opposition, Tshisekedi would have won the elections with or without fraud. People are reluctant to speak out because the national security services can have you imprisoned, as in the case of journalist [Stanis Bujakera Tshiamala](#), accused of leaking information to *Jeune Afrique*, which published an [article](#) with embarrassing details on the death of Chérubin Okende. Okende was the spokesman for political opponent Moïse Katumbi. The journalist, who refused to reveal his sources, was arrested. He remains in prison despite national and international pressure.

Mame-Penda BA: *Why is the rebellion starting up again now?*

Toussaint Murhula Kafarhire: It's true that the record of Tshisekedi's first term as president wasn't exactly stellar either. The only thing that really worked in his favor during the election campaign was his radical stance on the repeated invasions by the Rwandan army and the violence accompanying the exploitation of natural resources in the east of the DRC.

This was the central theme of a speech by another presidential candidate, Nobel Peace Prize winner [Dr. Denis Mukwege](#), who has worked extensively on the issues of women victims and gender-based violence in conflicts. So, for President Tshisekedi, talking about Kagame's rebellion in the East was also a way of countering Denis Mukwege's candidacy, because he was the only one, until now, to have spoken out at national and international level without mincing his words and to have denounced the invasion of Rwanda. So, for Tshisekedi, having this position meant rallying the population. So, he decided to make it his campaign message, sharing the vote. This was purely a political calculation on Tshisekedi's part, but not because he strongly believed in it - if he did, he would have already done so during his first term.

The M23 war resumed because Kagame, as I said earlier, is a military man who knows that to negotiate, he has to put himself in a position of strength. He also wants to send a message to his Congolese counterpart that he won't be intimidated by speeches. I think he's sending a signal to Tshisekedi to take responsibility for what he says. Indeed, during his campaign, President Tshisekedi had publicly declared: "If there is the slightest skirmish, if the life of a single Congolese is again threatened by Rwanda, then I guarantee that I will attack Rwanda all the way to Kigali.

Mame-Penda BA: *So, Kigali is essentially putting Kinshasa to the test and humiliating it (inter) nationally?*

Toussaint Murhula Kafarhire: It does indeed humiliate us, because we're no longer speaking the language of force, but that of negotiation. In the meantime, people are being killed and families are leaving their lands to take refuge in the city of Goma. Part of the eastern territories is under M23 control. This would humiliate any man, let alone a head of state.

Mame-Penda BA: *And now, what turn can things take? Will international mediation help find a solution? Or are we back in a cycle of uncertainty?*

Toussaint Murhula Kafarhire: We can never go back to the chaos and uncertainty of ten or twenty years ago, because there is a heightened political awareness among young Congolese. Even in the east of the country, where endless wars and repeated invasions persist, there are local resistance groups called "wazalendo" who are helping the regular army to fight the M23. So, the cards have been reshuffled. What's more, during the 1990s, Kagame played heavily on the sensitive issue of genocide, for which he alone had a monopoly on interpretation. Today, many people have taken a step back from Kagame's uniform discourse and have had the time to research and understand the complexity of the issue. In particular, a Cameroonian journalist, [Charles Onana, has done extensive research](#) into the 1994 genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda and its repercussions throughout the region, as well as into the tense situation in the Great Lakes region. His writings are extremely enlightening. He is obviously hated by the regime in Kigali.

What's more, there is no longer any such thing as a "rebel movement" in the DRC. Congolese who want to express their demands do not take up arms against their own country. They do it democratically, through a republican opposition. We have an increasingly liberalized, open political space, in which people dare to express themselves. Candidates who have lost elections, regardless of the degree of fraud involved, simply settle down and wait for the next election. The armed groups to be found in the east of the country are really self-defense forces; when the national army proves incapable of protecting them, they resist alone against the Rwandan invaders. They try to find mechanisms to protect their communities.

Today, Congo's greatest challenge lies in governance and leadership. During the recently-concluded Africa Cup of Nations, the players mimed the "Silence, on tue!" gesture in eastern Congo. This gesture was picked up by members of the government, who stood up and made the same gesture in the middle of the Council of Ministers. This obviously outraged the population, because the role of government is not only to denounce, but also and above all to act. This shows that leaders have little sense of responsibility to history and to the community. They don't know why they're here. If you look at all the rebellions in the East that have been going on for nearly thirty years, I think that blaming an external cause indefinitely is a lack of political courage. Many authorities have become scandalously rich from this situation. President Kagame runs a small country of around 15 million inhabitants. Kinshasa alone has a population of between 15 and 17 million, while the Congo has over 100 million inhabitants and is an extremely rich country. Many multinationals and nationals of other nations, such as Nigerians, Chinese, Indians and Lebanese, come to the Congo to enrich themselves. The Congolese people must become aware of their social and economic strength, and give themselves the means to make their country a major regional, continental and international power. It's a vocation that beckons and awaits. They cannot continue to cry or hide under the skin of victims, when the country has everything to be a great power. In politics, self-defence is a sacred duty. Nobody protects anybody, and that's why states take responsibility for themselves, protect their sovereignty, and equip themselves with the means to defend themselves. A responsible government will have to learn to make sacrifices, refuse corruption, and ensure greater social justice for the military, the police, teachers, the healthcare sector, and state administrators.

I'd like to come back to the question of identity. Rwandan infiltration benefits from it and will remain a war method and strategy as long as the Congolese state has not defined the contours of citizenship⁸. This structural weakness has enabled the Rwandan president to infiltrate Congolese institutions whenever he wanted. Indeed, when the fighters of the Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération (AFDL) arrived in Kinshasa in 1997, they all claimed to be "Zairians". Similarly, every time he invades the Congo, Kagamé claims to want to protect the Congo's Tutsi minority. In reality, this argument is invalid, as the Congo has a constitution that protects all its citizens equally. It's up to the Congolese government to protect them, since, taken individually, each ethnic group remains a minority in relation to the whole. This failure of the State to define the boundaries of citizenship remains the Achilles' heel in the sustainable resolution of the repeated crises in the eastern part of the Republic. One day, it will have to be taken up again with a great deal of intellectual courage, moral seriousness, patriotic interest, historical knowledge and ethical responsibility.

In addition to the issue of citizenship, there is the debate over the integrity of Congolese territory. As far back as 1998, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni said that Zaire's borders had been drawn arbitrarily by the colonizers, and that they now needed to be redefined. But according to the principles of the African Union, the borders inherited from colonization are intangible. This claim by Rwanda or Uganda, who are still seeking to balkanize the eastern part of the Congo, has little support from the African or international community.

Consequently, since Rwanda and Uganda are not in a position to obtain supplies or loot officially, they do so militarily.

Rwandan President Kagame has just signed a Memorandum of Understanding⁹ with the European Union on the value chain in the supply of strategic minerals. Ironically, when everyone knows that Rwanda has no important minerals on its territory, such an act, at a time when the DRC is conducting an aggressive diplomatic campaign to denounce the M23 violence, demonstrates the European Union's contempt for the Congolese people and government. The West's contempt¹⁰ is an expression of its desire for a Congo without Congolese people¹¹. The European Union cannot launder the blood minerals mined in the conflict zones of eastern Congo by signing an agreement with Kagame. The lack of ethics in the conduct of international relations, due to neo-liberal competition for so-called strategic resources, is a disgrace for this lesson-giving West.

8 Toussaint Kafarhire Murhula, S.J. (2003, April). 'L'autre face du conflit dans la crise de citoyenneté au Congo'. Congo-Afrique, 374.

9 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_822

10 <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/01/opinion/to-save-congo-let-it-fall-apart.html>

11 <https://www.pambazuka.org/governance/africa's-wealth-and-western-poverty-thought>