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Congo from Leopold II to Félix Tshisekedi

Demokratyczna Republika Konga od Leopolda II do Félix Tshisekedi

• Abstract •

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a country that has a significant number of natural resources that have not brought its inhabitants prosperity, but have become a cause of their exploitation and poverty instead. Congolese people have experienced many injustices for over a century mainly because of the political governance in the country. They suffer from hunger, numerous diseases and poverty; they also experience numerous violations of the human rights, including mass murders, rapes and mutilations, as well as the recruitments of child soldiers by the Congolese army and various armed groups from the Congo and neighbouring countries. The modern Democratic Republic of the Congo is an unstable state, particularly vulnerable to the actions of numerous rebel organizations. The causes of the contemporary socio-political situation in this country can be found primarily in its history, starting from the cruel times of Leopold II during the Belgian colonisation, then through the Mobutu dictatorship and all subsequent presidents. The aim of the article is to present the undemocratic governments in the Congo, which led to the exploitation of its inhabitants and contributed to the current unstable situation of the country.

• Abstrakt •

Demokratyczna Republika Konga jest krajem posiadającym istotne zasoby naturalne, które nie przyniosły jednak jego mieszkańcom dobrobytu, a zamiast tego stały się przyczyną ich wyzysku i biedy. Od ponad wieku Kongijczycy doświadczają wielu niesprawiedliwości, przede wszystkim z powodu sprawowanej w tym kraju władzy. Mieszkańcy Demokratycznej Republiki Konga cierpią z powodu głodu, licznych chorób i biedy; doświadczają także licznych pogwałceń swoich praw, w tym masowych mordów, gwałtów i okaleczeń, jak również przymusowej rekrutacji dziecięcych żołnierzy, zarówno przez kongijską armię, jak i różnorodne grupy zbrojne, zarówno kongijskie, jak i te z państw sąsiednich. Współczesna Republika Konga jest państwem niestabilnym, szczególnie narażonym na działania licznych organizacji rebelianckich. Przyczyn współczesnej sytuacji społeczno-politycznej można doszukiwać się przede wszystkim w historii tego państwa, poczynając od okrutnych czasów Leopolda II podczas kolonizacji belgijskiej, przez dyktaturę Mobutu, po niedemokratyczne rządy kolejnych prezydentów. Celem artykułu jest ukazanie niedemokratycznych rządów w Demokratycznej Republice Konga, które (wszystkie po kolei) prowadziły

do wyczerpania jego mieszkańców oraz wpłynęły na obecną niestabilną sytuację tego państwa.

Keywords: Democratic Republic of the Congo; Africa; Mobutu Sese Seko; Leopold II

Słowa kluczowe: Demokratyczna Republika Konga; Afryka; Mobutu Sese Seko; Leopold II

Introduction

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is Africa's second largest country by area and third most populous. It is located in its central part. The history of DRC is full of difficult experiences that have significantly influenced its contemporary socio-political situation. It has changed its name many times, depending on who was in power. During the colonial period, the DRC was called the Congo Free State (until 1908) and the Belgian Congo (until 1960), while after it gained independence in 1960–1971 it was the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and after Mobutu Sese Seko took power it was called Zaire (Jaremczuk, 2008, p. 289). In order to distinguish the DR Congo from the neighbouring Republic of the Congo it was sometimes called Congo-Léopoldville and now, after the capital was renamed, as Congo-Kinshasa.

Due to changes in the name of the country, the name 'Congo' is sometimes used in this publication to denote the territory of the modern Democratic Republic of Congo. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a country with significant natural resources. Natural resources ranging from gold and diamonds to copper, cobalt and oil are plentiful in the DRC. Belgian colonisers exploited its resources of rubber, coffee, cocoa, and palm oil. Later, the land of the present DRC was used to mine copper, diamonds, tin, zinc, manganese, as well as iron ore in its territory. During and after the Second World War, the importance of the DRC again increased due to the uranium found on its territory, which was necessary for the production of nuclear weapons. The modern Democratic Republic of Congo has again become a place possessing a desirable natural resource, which is coltan (columbite-tantalite), i.e., tantalum ore used for the production of modern electronic devices that are found in every home in the world (mobile phones, laptops, computer game consoles) (Nadolski, 2017).

However, the natural riches found in this country did not bring prosperity to its inhabitants, but instead became the cause of their exploitation and poverty. At this point, one can quote the very apt words of Michał Staniul: "Strange and dangerous is the land. It casts a spell on anyone who wishes to rule it. This curse will make even

the wisest, most composed man ignite an unrestrained lust for the riches hidden in Congo” (Staniul, 2010).

The present situation of the population of DRC is very dramatic. The people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo suffer from hunger, numerous diseases and poverty. According to data from the World Food Programme (WFP), four out of ten people in the DRC have no access to food and around 15.6 million suffer from hunger. Malnutrition is particularly evident in the east part of the country, where decades of violent conflict have forced people to flee their homes – in some cases several times over. In the first half of 2020, nearly one million residents were displaced from their homes due to new conflicts. Displaced people across the DRC (over 5 million people) are living in makeshift camps and in areas characterised by very poor sanitary conditions and lack of adequate medical assistance. This makes the majority of the population particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 infection. In addition to the threat of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, Congolese residents are also at risk of contracting other dangerous deadly diseases: malaria and cholera. A new measles epidemic has broken out in the central Kasai region, which is a particular threat to malnourished children. In addition, there are frequent outbreaks of the Ebola virus, which are decimating the country’s population (UN News, 2020). The Congolese also experience numerous violations of their rights, including mass murder, rape and mutilation, as well as the forced recruitment of child soldiers by both the Congolese army and various armed groups – the Congolese and those from neighbouring countries.

This article presents the Democratic Republic of the Congo since Leopold II took power, that is, since the colonisation of this territory by the King of the Belgians. From that moment on, the dramatic exploitation of the country’s rich resources began at the expense of its people. It can be argued here that the consequences of colonialism still influence the undemocratic character of the government in that country to this today.

The article is primarily descriptive in nature and its aim is to show the undemocratic rule in the Congo, which (all in succession) led to the exploitation of its inhabitants and contributed to the current unstable situation of the country.

The Congo Free State in the colonial period

The territory of the present DRC had become the private domain of the Belgian king (*‘domaine de la couronne’*) Leopold II since colonisation (Chodak, 1963, pp. 266–267). The Congo Free State was therefore not free and its territories were

purchased by Leopold II and were not the property of the Belgian state, instead they were entirely the private property of the monarch. Leopold's time in power is rated as one of the most cruel and ruthless. In his book *King Leopold's Ghost: A Tale of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, Adam Hochschild describes the history of the Congo during the reign of King Leopold II in such words – “The more I delved into it, the clearer, the more I realised that a century ago the Congo had indeed experienced a crime whose scale was comparable to the Holocaust” (Hochschild, 2012, p. 12). Joseph Conrad, after travelling to the territory of the modern Democratic Republic of Congo in 1890, described the atrocities he observed there in his famous novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

The Belgians' approach to the local population was indeed characterised by incredible cruelty. The inhabitants of this colony were treated as cheap labour. The natives were used for slave labour on rubber, coffee, cocoa and sugar cane plantations and in diamond and gold mines. The Congolese starved to death during their slave labour on the rubber plantations and many of them had their hands cut off if they did not work hard enough to meet the king's demand. Photographs of mutilated Congolese people missing their hands have survived to this day. According to estimates, around 10 million people died on rubber plantations managed by the Belgians at the time (Wolska, 2020). The causes of death of the Congolese at that time were mainly hunger, exhaustion caused by hard work, accidents, conflicts and numerous infectious diseases.

Leopold's critics called the Congo Free State's mode of governance 'red rubber' to emphasise that the rubber trees that grew on land soaked with the blood of its inhabitants (Renton, Seddon, & Zeilig, 2007, p. 29).

Slave labour in the colony brought incredible profits to the king. He invested the money gained from exploitation in bank accounts around the world.

At his palace in Tervuren, Leopold built the Museum of Africa with a 'Human Zoo', where 267 Congolese people were housed. The king himself reportedly never personally visited his subordinate territories, but he knew exactly what was happening there (Rannard & Webster, 2020).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the world heard about the bestial treatment of the inhabitants of the Congo Free State.

The crimes of the cruel king were first described by William Sheppard and later by the investigative journalist Edmund Morel (Hochschild, 2012, pp. 12–13). In 1904, Leopold was forced to form a commission to investigate the situation in his colony. In 1908, Leopold II was stripped of his colonial rights to the Congo Free State, which became a colony of Belgium, and from then on it was called the Belgian Congo (Popławski, 2017, p. 1).

The ethnically and politically diverse society and the lack of educated human resources were the root of the country's subsequent instability. Although the Belgians often boasted that they had developed their colony and contributed to a significant increase in literacy rates, it emerged after decolonisation that only 17 out of Congo's 20 million citizens had a university education (Prunier, 2009, p. 76).

The Belgians feared that the development of intelligence among Africans would contribute to the formation of a liberation movement, so they severely restricted their access to higher education. The colonisers needed cheap labour managed by a European elite. The Belgians declared independence for their colony rather quickly and did not prepare the Congolese people for it very well. The country after decolonisation had no qualified cadres capable of governing itself (Leśniewski, 2000, p. 378).

After only six months of transition, the Congo Free State became independent on June 30, 1960 (Rydel 1997, p. 362).

The first years after decolonisation

Patrice Lumumba became the first prime minister of the sovereign state of Congo and Joseph Kasavubu became president (Doudou, 2011, p. 44). The appointment of two political opponents to the most important positions was meant to prevent a possible power struggle.

However, already on July 5, 1960, just a few days after gaining independence, the then capital Léopoldville saw a revolt of Congolese soldiers, who were against the continued leadership by Belgian commanders (Jagielski, 1997a, p. 14).

The riots that engulfed the entire city became a considerable threat to the Belgian civilian population living there. In an attempt to bring the situation under control, Prime Minister Lumumba dismissed the then Commander-in-Chief and Africanised the officer corps. Joseph Mobutu was then appointed chief of staff (Leśniewski, 2000, pp. 381–382).

The soldiers' revolt destabilised the state and led to the collapse of the administrative apparatus, which contributed to the growth of separatist tendencies. On July 11, the pro-Western politician Moïse Tshombe announced the secession of the richest part of the Republic – Katanga. This event met with the approval of European mine owners and Belgian settlers and military (Rydel, 1997, p. 362).

On the day Moïse Tshombe announced the secession of Katanga, Prime Minister Lumumba and President Kasavubu asked the United Nations for help (Leśniewski, 2000, p. 384). As early as July 14, the Security Council decided to launch a military operation in the Congo (Turski, 1962, p. 193).

However, despite the presence of the international forces sent to that region and the involvement of the then UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld in the resolution of the conflict, there was further destabilisation of the Congo.

Lumumba, with the support of the USSR, tried to solve the problem of Katanga's secession himself. His cooperation with Moscow and his disagreements with the UN caused discontent with the conservative President Kasavubu, who decided to dismiss Lumumba on September 5. The response was a formal dismissal of the president by Lumumba, who sought to centralise power. However, the new parliament made no decision (Hesselbein, 2007, pp. 21–24).

The conflict in the Congo also gave rise to sharp disagreements within the United Nations. The Soviet Union accused Western states of pursuing their interests (Michałowska, 1997, p. 81). In an effort to support Lumumba, the USSR demanded the dismissal of Secretary General Hammarskjöld and the establishment of the institution of a triumvirate¹ in his place (Leśniewski, 2000, p. 385).

Against the backdrop of the conflict, on September 14, 1960, Colonel Joseph Mobutu staged a military putsch under the guise of resolving intra-state disputes. Patrice Lumumba was placed under house arrest (Michałowska, 1997, p. 81). With the help of friends, Lumumba managed to escape from house arrest, but by early December he had been recaptured by Mobutu soldiers and arrested (Leśniewski, 2000, p. 385).

He was initially held in the military prison in Thysville, but in January 1961, Lumumba was taken to a Katanga prison where he was killed (Turski, 1962, p. 200). Lumumba's corpse was dissolved in hydrochloric acid (Jagielski, 1997a, p. 14). In September 1961, UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld was also killed in a plane crash (most likely an assassination attempt) (Rydel, 1997, p. 64).

However, after the coup Joseph Mobutu did not take power and all offices were returned to civilians (Staniul, 2010). Kasavubu became president again, and the country began to reform and reorganise the army. The government also received support and assistance from the US and Belgium (Hesselbein, 2007, pp. 21–24).

In 1961, Kasavubu consolidated his political position. He managed to unite some of the political opponents in charge of the rebellious provinces into a federation with a strong government. However, the situation in the country was not stable. In 1963, the Lumumbists formed the National Liberation Committee and a year later they provoked an uprising. At the end of 1964, Moïse Tshombe, appointed by Joseph Kasavubu as Prime Minister, and Joseph Mobutu, commander of the

¹ Its members were to represent: the Soviet bloc, the Western countries and the Non-Aligned Movement.

army, with the support of the Belgian and American armies, defeated the rebels (Encyklopedia PWN, n.d.).

In 1965, there was a constitutional crisis in which Prime Minister Moïse Tshombe and President Joseph Kasavubu fought for power. In the midst of this turmoil, Joseph Mobutu staged a coup (Hesselbein, 2007, p. 23). This time, unlike five years earlier, he decided to keep power in his hands under the guise of maintaining peace in the country. By means of military operations and executions of discredited politicians, he brought long-awaited stability to the Congo (Staniul, 2010).

Mobutu Sese Seko

After coming to power, Joseph Désiré Mobutu changed his name to Mobutu Sese Seko Nkuku Ngbendu waza Banga (Mobutu Sese Seko, for short) (*Mobutu Sese Seko. Biography*, n.d.) which meant: “The all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, will go from conquest to conquest, leaving fire in his wake” (Brittanica, n.d.). Mobutu also adopted many titles throughout his time in power to emphasise his unique role in the state: Father of the Nation, Supreme Commander, Deliverer of the People, etc. He also believed that without him Congo could not function smoothly (Staniul, 2010). After taking power, Mobutu moved very quickly to eliminate his political opponents. Many of them bade farewell to their lives in front of crowds of spectators. Former Prime Minister Évariste Kimba was arrested on May 31, 1966, by the security forces and publicly accused of involvement in a plot to overthrow Mobutu. Two days later, he was publicly hanged in Kinshasa along with others accused of conspiracy in front of a crowd of 100,000 (*The New York Times*, 1966).

One of Mobutu’s most ruthless killings was of the revolutionary activist Pierre Mulele. Sese Seko promised an amnesty to Mulele while he was abroad, but upon his return home, the activist faced persecution until, in October 1968, he was brutally killed in a public execution, with his eyes gouged out, his genitals and his legs cut off. This murder is considered one of the most brutal in the 20th century (WP Wiadomości, 2009, pp. 4–6).

Mobutu created the Popular Movement of the Revolution (Mouvement populaire de la révolution – MPR) – a party that was, under Sese Seko, the only legal one and, interestingly, included every citizen of the country from their birth. The creation of the monoparty was supposed to contribute to the unity of the citizens. The party had control even over the lower levels of the state apparatus, over youth and student unions and organisations (Young & Turner, 1985, p. 43). The president

ruled by decree and used torture as a method of interrogation and punishment of his opponents. Since 1973, Mobutu started to implement a policy called “authenticism” (“zairisation”) (Jaremczuk, 2004, p. 82; Bielecki, 2011, p. 209), which was expressed in the change of European names to African ones. The capital, Léopoldville, was renamed Kinshasa, the province of Katanga was renamed Shaba, and the name of the country was changed to Zaire (French, 1997). His actions were primarily aimed at emphasising the importance of the indigenous inhabitants of the state and rejecting the customs, costumes and way of life brought by Europeans. Zaireans were forbidden for more than two decades to use Christian names, listen to foreign music on the radio (French, 1997) and use the phrases “sir”, “ma’am”. Suits and ties were also banned, to be replaced by revolutionary uniforms – abacostas – whose name reportedly derived from the slogan proclaimed at rallies – “A bas de la costume”, i.e., “Down with the suit”.

Mobutu himself, on the other hand, wore a characteristic leopardskin cap and held in his hand an ebony wood carved staff, which was a symbol of power and was supposed to provide the president with magical powers (Jagielski, 1997a, p. 15).

However, the Africanisation that Mobutu implemented was only a part of his ideology. The cult of the individual became obligatory in the country and Mobutu appeared everywhere: on posters, school pictures and paintings. Poems and songs were written in his honour, and places of importance from his biography were visited by pilgrims (Staniul, 2010).

Belgian journalist Colette Braeckman assessed Mobutu’s worship of power with the words: “Power for him was an end in itself. Power was to be exercised. He was intoxicated by power. It was like a drug to him. He liked to use it to humiliate others, his advisers, his ministers, his foreign guests. He once said that he would never allow himself to be described as ‘the ex-president’. The thought that he might lose power was scarier to him than the thought that he would one day die” (Jagielski, 1997a, p. 15).

During his rule, Mobutu nationalised coal and copper mines, as well as major plantations. Most of the profits from raw material exports went to the President’s private coffers. The elite were corrupted or intimidated by him. He conducted a disastrous foreign policy, which left Congo in conflict with most of its neighbours (Popławski, 2017, p. 1). However, the fact that from the very beginning he presented himself as a staunch anti-communist won him considerable acceptance from Western countries. Despite violating basic democratic principles, Mobutu received political, military and economic aid (Lizak, 2002, p. 193). In 1970, President Richard Nixon addressed Mobutu with words full of approval: “Although you are young and come from a young nation, there are things we can learn from you”. Americans supported

Mobutu's regime by turning a blind eye to his undemocratic rule and human rights violations² (Staniul, 2010).

As the USA's 'best African friend', it was designated by Kennedy as the main executor of anti-Soviet policy in Africa (Szostkiewicz, 1997, p. 88). Zaire was also an important strategic point in the world and, bordering nine countries, was a very important place to control Central Africa. Between 1970 and 1994 it received aid of almost 10 billion dollars from the Western bloc countries (Jagielski, 1997a, p. 16). The Americans also invested considerable amounts of money in the mining sector. Thanks to high prices of copper, which was the most important export of the country, Zaire quickly became a rich country.

Mobutu treated state money as his own, with half the budget going to his private spending. He bought luxury residences all over the world. The most beautiful of these was the Villa del Mare in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin on the French Riviera, worth about \$5 million. In his native village, Gbadolite, he built a palace (called the "Versailles in the jungle") next to which there was an airport of such size that even a Concorde could land there (Jagielski, 1997a, p. 16). He led a very lavish life: he went to the dentist in Paris, a Portuguese barber visited him every fortnight, he had a Spanish tailor, and a furrier who took care of sewing his famous caps. A French majordomo worked in Mobutu's house in Gbadolite. The president of Zaire was one of the richest men in the world.

However, the prosperity did not last long. In the 1970s copper prices fell and revenue to the state budget decreased significantly. Zaire found itself in a very difficult financial situation and, despite possessing significant amounts of mineral resources, became one of the poorest countries in Africa (Jaremczuk, 2004, p. 85).

The policies pursued by Mobutu made it very difficult for ordinary people to survive in Zaire in the 1980s. Government officials were corrupt and focused their attention on getting rich instead of saving the country's ailing economy.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the end of the Cold War, Mobutu's power weakened considerably. The West began to force Mobutu to carry out major reforms in the country: introducing a multi-party system and holding free elections. The United States no longer saw the benefit of supporting his state, and Mobutu therefore lost the support of the Western world. Congo's growing economic problems and internal political unrest significantly worsened his situation. Under increasing pressure, he finally lifted the ban on political parties and agreed in 1990 to change the country's political system to a multi-party democracy (Brittanica, n.d.).

² The Congolese president ruled by decree and allowed only one political party to exist, and torture was used as a method of interrogation and punishment of the African leader's enemies.

He announced the regime changes during a tearful speech asking the audience to understand his strong emotions (“Comprenez mon émotion”) (Loffman, 2017b).

Mobutu's big political mistake was the support he gave in 1994 to Rwandan refugees from the Hutu tribe. The refugees left Rwanda in fear of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which had seized power in the country. Mobutu agreed to the arrival of the refugees because he wanted to regain the support of the international community (Loffman, 2017b).

The Hutus settled in the east of what was then Zaire and from there attacked the Tutsi population living in Rwanda and Burundi. The Tutsis were supported by their compatriots living in the Banyamulenge region and the African leaders of neighbouring states Rwanda and Uganda, who provided military assistance to the fighters (Lizak, 2002, p. 193).

Mobutu's strategy thus collapsed in the face of opposition from Rwanda. The then vice-president from the Tutsi tribe, Paul Kagame, began planning an invasion of eastern Congo (Loffman, 2017b).

Kagame decided to use Mobutu's long-time enemy Laurent Kabila in this conflict. With the support of the Rwandan as well as Ugandan authorities, Mobutu's opponents organised themselves under Kabila's leadership into a politico-military structure called the Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaïre (AFDL), which was supported by the Rwandan and Ugandan authorities (Popławski, 2017).

On May 16 1997, AFDL troops captured Kinshasa. Finally, after 32 years of rule, Mobutu gave up power and fled from the rebels. Abandoned by all his friends, he finally died of prostate cancer on September 7, 1997, in the Moroccan capital Rabat, where he was buried in a Christian cemetery (Jagielski, 1997b, p. 6). Mobutu's enthusiastically received reign ended in a catastrophic collapse of state services as a consequence of his policies, most notably the misappropriation of international development funds (Loffman, 2017a).

The Kabilas's dynasty

Laurent-Désiré Kabila became the new president of the Congo. After taking power, Kabila promised changes. The previous name of the state, Zaire, was changed to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Staniul, 2010).

However, the continuity of Mobutu's regime was evident in Kabila's policies. The new president, like his predecessor, cracked down on political opponents and, like before, the state under his rule was extremely corrupt (Loffman, 2017b). As

Reuben Loffman noted, “Kabila followed the path of Mobutism without Mobutu” (Loffman, 2017b).

In 1998, Kabila became involved in a conflict with Rwanda, which was supported by Uganda and Burundi. Kabila’s army was very weak, but the DRC leader was nevertheless able to mobilise many neighbouring states – Angola, Chad, Namibia, Sudan, and Zimbabwe – to help. This large number of countries involved in the conflict led to it being called “Africa’s world war”. Kabila himself did not live to see the end of this conflict, as he was assassinated in 2001 (Loffman, 2017b). More than 5 million people died as a result of this war and its subsequent aftermath. In addition, millions of people were displaced from their homes or sought asylum in neighbouring countries (*Congo Civil War*, n.d.).

In 2001, after the death of Laurent Kabila, his 29-year-old son Joseph Kabila became president. In 2002, he led the People’s Party for Reconstruction and Democracy (Parti du peuple pour la reconstruction et la démocratie, PPRD). While in power, he lifted the ban on political parties. Young Kabila helped draft the 2002 peace agreement with the UN (Popławski, 2017, p. 3). At the beginning of the 21st century, efforts to stabilise the economic situation began in the DR Congo.

With the help of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, structural reforms were initiated to liberalise the economy, curb hyperinflation and create a stable economic situation. In 2002, Congo recorded positive growth in gross domestic product – GDP – the first time in more than ten years (Akitoby & Cinyabuguma, 2004, p. 4).

In 2006, the young Kabila won the first democratic elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As many as 35 candidates ran for election. After the first round, only two remained: Joseph Kabila and Jean-Pierre Bemba, who received respectively: 45% and 20% of the votes cast. In the 2nd round, Joseph Kabila finally won with 58.05% of the votes (Jaremczuk, 2008, p. 299). In 2011, Kabila Junior was again victorious in another election. However, the opposition accused him of violating electoral procedures. It also began to be noticed that his political decisions began to be more and more similar to those of his father during his presidency. Kabila Junior corrupted politicians, failed to quell local conflicts and, fearing upheaval in the country, strengthened the Republican guard, and began to restrict media freedom by closing down or jamming independent radio stations. Joseph Kabila’s term was set to end on December 20, 2016, but he did not step down from his post by the deadline (Popławski, 2017, p. 4). The day before, his spokesman Barnabé Kikaya said that a new president must be elected before Kabila could step down.

Hundreds of demonstrators gathered in Kinshasa for this reason and, with a substantial military force present, riots began. The demonstrators demanded that

the President step down and that elections be organised. The riots resulted in dozens of deaths (International Business Times, 2016).

The deteriorating humanitarian situation in the DRC compounded by the failure to elect a new authority in the country forced the President to agree to hold elections. On December 30, 2018, presidential elections were finally held to determine Kabila's successor. The president himself backed his former interior minister Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary in the election (BBC News, 2018). On January 10, 2019, however, the electoral commission announced that opposition leader Félix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo was the winner in the presidential election.

The political situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo under Félix Tshisekedi

Félix Tshisekedi was sworn in as president on January 24, 2019. However, more than one million Congolese people were unable to participate in the elections because voting in three areas was postponed until March 2019. The threat of an Ebola virus outbreak in the east of the country was cited as the official reason. During his swearing-in, the new president pledged to create civil guarantees in the Congo, to end all forms of discrimination and to fight corruption, impunity and lawlessness and violations of democratic principles. After taking power, the new president released most of the political prisoners and activists who had been detained during the political crisis. However, many senior officers of the security forces remained in their positions and have a record of involvement in serious human rights violations (Human Rights Watch, n.d.).

During his first two years in power, Félix Tshisekedi was still in conflict with his predecessor Joseph Kabila. Indeed, the political allies of the former president, who stepped down in January 2019, still maintained control over key ministries, the legislature, the judiciary and the security services.

It was only in April 2021 that Tshisekedi managed to take control of the cabinet and parliament. In the 500-member National Assembly, almost 400 members are parliamentarians supporting the new president. The pro-Kabila Speakers of both houses of parliament have been removed from their posts (*DR Congo Names New Cabinet...*, 2021). The new government announced 343 new initiatives. Tshisekedi's proposed changes are to include economic and social reforms that his predecessor effectively blocked. There are hopes that the economic situation in the country will improve. The new president faces many challenges. Thanks to rising commodity prices, Tshisekedi may benefit from an economic recovery in 2021 and carry out

reforms that were stalled by his predecessor. However, the biggest problem will still be the internal conflicts in the country (Smith & Bujakera Tshiamala, 2021).

However, the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is still very tense, particularly in the east. Numerous armed groups operate in the DRC, the largest of which are the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), and the Mai Mai militias. These groups fight among themselves for power, control over mineral resources (e.g., gold) and political representation. As in other countries in this region of the world, the DRC's central authorities are unable to prevent conflicts and struggle with the problem of continuing poor sanitary conditions, numerous epidemics, poverty, unemployment, and daily violence. On February 22, 2021, the Italian ambassador to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luca Attanasio, was assassinated. The ambassador was moving in a larger convoy made up of representatives of the UN mission MONUSCO from Goma to the village of Rutshuru (Kucharczak & Figuła, 2021).

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has been a country in crisis for years, and even a change of president has not proven itself to be an easy and quick solution to the conflicts and problems, such as poverty and numerous epidemics, which are the result of years of rule by undemocratic leaders.

Conclusions

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is one of the poorest countries in the world, with more than 70% of people living in poverty. The Congo also continues to be a place where natural resources are a source of exploitation for the local population and state instability. More and more children are being born with birth defects in the Katanga region. Wide-scale cobalt mining in this part of the DRC is considered to be the cause. Cobalt mining, smelting and other industrial activities related to this metallic element have a significant impact on environmental pollution and on the people working in the mines as well as those living near them. The consequences for health are tragic – above all for pregnant women and their children. At present, cobalt is in very high demand, mainly due to its use in the manufacture of lithium batteries used in electric cars. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is in possession of at least 60% of the world's reserves of this element (mainly the Katanga region and its surroundings) (Aljazeera, 2021). This is yet another natural resource which is becoming a cause of human tragedy in this part of the world, instead of bringing prosperity to its inhabitants.

Today's Congo is also an unstable state, particularly exposed to the activities of numerous rebel organisations. Moreover, the situation in the country is currently very tense. In the north-eastern and eastern provinces, and in the areas bordering the Central African Republic, there is a danger of robberies, kidnappings and riots. In the capital, even in its very centre, numerous crimes and armed robberies take place.

The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs advises on its website against all travel to many provinces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They also advise against unnecessary travel to other parts of the country (Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, n.d.).

As Błażej Popławski notes, "Congo is a classic example of a failed state. In the ranking of so-called fragile states, it has been among the 10 most dysfunctional state organisms in the world for a decade" (Popławski, 2017, p. 3).

Finally, it is worth emphasising that the causes of the contemporary unstable socio-political situation can be traced primarily to the history of this country starting from the cruel times of Leopold II during the Belgian colonisation, later through the Mobutu dictatorship and the undemocratic rule of successive presidents. For over a century, the Congolese people have experienced many injustices, above all because of the government that has been in power in this country, which, regardless of changes, has been and continues to be a source of exploitation and cruelty towards its inhabitants.

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