

In the Shadow of the 'Great Helmsman': Mobutu Sese Seko's Life and Legacy in the DR Congo

On the 20th anniversary of Mobutu Sese Seko's death, Reuben Loffman examines the life and legacy of one of Africa's most prominent leaders.

Today marks twenty years since the death of Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga (the all-powerful warrior who goes from conquest to conquest leaving fire in his wake) who ruled what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) for thirty-two years.

Born Joseph Mobutu in Lisala, in the extreme north-west of the then Belgian Congo, on 14 October 1930, Mobutu went on to become a definitive figure in the DRC's post-colonial history.

Like a number of first generation African leaders, such as Jean-Bédél Bokassa, the army made Mobutu. After he enlisted in 1949, the army provided him with a means by which he could dominate his fellow citizens. In addition to the loyal men he eventually commanded as he rose up the ranks, Mobutu eventually received training in journalism in the army. Researching for his reportage, he grew to know many of the leading Congolese politicians during the late 1950s. Eventually, he got to know Patrice Lumumba, the first Prime Minister of the Congo, and joined his *Mouvement National Congolais* (MNC).

Mobutu's meteoric rise to power came during the Congo Crisis (1960-1964). The army took on an important role in the Congo as it was tasked with preventing the secession of the mineral-rich provinces of Katanga and Kasai. Politicians struggled with governing this contested state. Lumumba was assassinated in 1961, for example, and his successors proved unable to govern the Congo. In 1965, a constitutional crisis developed in which the Prime Minister, Moïse Tshombe, and the President, Joseph Kasa-Vubu, wrestled for power. In the midst of this deadlock, Mobutu launched a successful coup-d'état.

Mobutu quickly moved to ban politics having blamed politicians for his country's ills. Like many African leaders at the time, such as François Tombalbaye of Chad, he wanted to fashion a nationalism based on what he believed to have been authentic African traditions. In May 1967, Mobutu and a band of his followers published the N'Sele Manifesto to that effect. In the early 1970s, Mobutu intensified his authenticity campaign in which the name of the Congo was changed to Zaïre and the names of cities were changed to their supposedly original African names.

The intensification of authenticity, however, came at a time in which Zaïre's economy was fast declining. A fall in copper prices crippled the economy. Likewise, Mobutu's policy of nationalising industries and handing out lucrative contracts to his allies, known as 'Zaïrianisation,' proved catastrophic. So, in 1976, Zaïre accepted its first Structural Adjustment Package (SAP).

It was during the late 1970s that Mobutu's policy of paying off opponents and buying allies, or 'kleptocracy,' would be fine-tuned. Rather than a by-word for the optimistic nationalism of the late 1960s, Mobutism became a synonym for kleptocratic rule and remains one of Mobutu's lasting legacies to this day.

Mobutu's regime needed patronage to survive in the face of economic collapse and he found it in the United States. With US funds, Mobutu just about managed to hold his polyglot country together.



Mobutu Sese Seko meets with Richard Nixon in Washington DC in 1973, one of a number of US Presidents whom he befriended

Yet Mobutu's kleptocratic regime crumbled once the Cold War ended. Rather than supporting his autocratic regime, the US pressured Mobutu to democratise. In 1990, Mobutu agreed to multi-party democracy. He announced this policy during a [tear-strewn address at which he told the audience to 'comprenez mon émotion'](#). But the details of this new policy were delayed and the army used this power vacuum to go on a looting spree in September 1991.

In 1992, a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) was convened to decide which form the new multi-party system would take. Rather than furthering the SNC's work, Mobutu successfully sowed division among the delegates and managed to stay in power.

Then came the Rwandan genocide in April 1994. At first, Mobutu sought to use the arrival of Rwandan Tutsi and Hutu refugees in his country to ingratiate himself once more to the international community not as a Cold War ally but as a humanitarian. Yet Mobutu's strategy collapsed in the face of Rwandan opposition to his hosting of Hutu refugees on his eastern border. Fearing Hutu invasion, Rwandan President Paul Kagame began to plan an invasion of eastern Congo.

Kagame used Mobutu's long-time opponent, Laurent Kabila, to front a movement called the *Alliance des Forces Democratiques pour la Liberation du Zaïre* (ADFL-Z) that would dethrone the self-styled 'Great Helmsman.' On 24 October 1996, the ADFL-Z's campaign began. On 19 April, they captured Lubumbashi. It was only a matter of time until Kinshasa fell.

Facing defeat, Mobutu fled Kinshasa on 16 May 1997 leaving the ADFL-Z to march into the capital unopposed. At first, Mobutu fled to his palace in [Gbadolite](#), his 'Versailles of the Jungle,' but he later fled to Rabat, Morocco, where he died of prostate cancer on 7 September.

[Laurent Kabila](#), or Kabila Père, promised a change from Mobutu but what was striking about his regime was its continuity with that of the deceased despot. Like Mobutu, Kabila cracked down on political opponents. And, much like the 'Great Helmsman,' Kabila's regime was hardly free of the kind of rampant corruption that had preceded it even though he succeeded in establishing an anti-corruption centre.

In essence, Kabila followed the path of '[Mobutism without Mobutu](#).' He 'spoke the language of the one-party state' and [tried to play off political opponents against one another](#).

Like Mobutu, Kabila Père fell due to a dispute with Rwanda after he summarily dismissed his Kagame's handlers in July 1998. Afterwards, the newly baptised DRC was once again plunged into war.

Kabila's army was woefully under-prepared to take on the collective might of Rwanda and its allies, Uganda and Burundi. Unlike Mobutu, however, Kabila was able to mobilise a plethora of neighbouring states to come to his aid, namely Angola, Chad, Namibia, Sudan and Zimbabwe. The bewildering array of African states involved in this conflict led some to dub it '[Africa's World War](#).'

Laurent Kabila did not live to see the end of Africa's World War given that he was assassinated in 2001. His son, Joseph Kabila, became the country's fourth president shortly after he died. Joseph Kabila helped engineer a peace deal, along with the United Nations, in 2002 that led to a broad yet deeply unstable peace developing in 2003. Afterwards, the first free and fair elections since 1960 were held in the Congo in 2006 and Kabila retained his position as president after them.

There was widespread optimism that the Congo had turned a corner during the early part of Kabila's presidency despite the flaws with the 2006 and 2011 elections. However, in recent times Joseph Kabila's rule has looked increasingly like Mobutu's. For one thing, Kabila and his family have amassed a [huge business empire](#) with stakes in everything from Nando's to the state telecoms company. It is possible that Kabila [has refused to step down once his mandate expired last year](#) in part to protect these interests.

One of the most striking similarities between Kabila and Mobutu has been the former's ability to play off rivals against each other. Kabila has used his ability to choose the Prime Minister of the DR Congo to sow division among the Congolese opposition. Rather than choosing popular opposition figures, Kabila has chosen people who have upset his opponents, such as Samy Badibanga.

Although Mobutu might be dead and buried, the lesson of his divide and rule tactics, as well as his kleptocratic tendencies, has not been lost on Joseph Kabila. And once again it is the majority of Congolese people who are paying the cost of living in Mobutu's shadow.

Reuben Loffman ([@ReubenLoffman](#)) is a Lecturer in African History at Queen Mary University of London.

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.