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CONGO: POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT REPORT

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Congolese politics is structured by tribal and personal followings and the movements which emerge as coalitions of those followings.

Tribes: The Bateke in the north. Though President Sassou-Nguesso is from the north, the Bateke are not included in the northern ethnic power base. They feel they deserve more, but, historically, the Bateke have been ruled and not rulers. Other tribal groups are unlikely to accept a Bateke ruler. Lari and Kongo. These tribes are the two major groups around Brazzaville and are sometimes referred to as the "Pool." Former leader Youlou was Lari, and former leader Massemba-Debat was Kongo. Other ethnic groups fear the Pool's plans and power and have kept Lari and Kongo members out of sensitive government positions. The Vili in the south have entered this conspiracy, principally through the President's wife, who is a Vili. The Vili, Lari, and Kongo effectively divide power in the south into three conflicting groups, diffusing the potential threat to Sassou-Nguesso. Finally, the Mbochi, Makouas, and Kouyou tribes in the northern Cuvette region strongly support the President.

Individuals: Personal poles of power also exist, though Sassou-Nguesso's moves over the past year to solidify his own political position have lessened the threat from many of them. Former ministers of information Ntsiba and Abibi have both been dismissed. Ntsiba is a Bateke and was part of the hard-line, Moscow-oriented faction within the government. Abibi replaced Ntsiba as minister of information and propounded a Marxist-Africanist ideological blend thought to be close to the President's. Abibi may have been removed, however, because he was becoming too powerful an ideological figure with the Party (the Parti Congolais du Travail, PCT). Former interior minister Katali, Moscow's principal man in Brazzaville, has also been dismissed. These actions have at least removed these individuals from the government and the Party, though not necessarily from the political scene. Other important government members are the President's wife, who has been taking on more political responsibilities (including travelling abroad for the President); Prime Minister Goma; and politburo member Tchicaya-Thystere, the President's official guardian of Marxist purity. All three are Vili.

These tribal and individual power groupings coalesce as four general political movements. First, the pro-Moscow Marxists, led by Katali and Ntsiba and foreign minister Mba. This group bases its strength on ties to the Impfondo tribe in the extreme north of Congo and on the support of the armed forces and security apparatus. Second, a group called "M-22", the only pan-tribal group of the four. This movement is also strongly Marxist and has been encouraged by the President as an alternative to the Moscow organization. Bongou, the politburo secretary-general, is its apparent leader. Students, the trade unions, and the 30-40 year old cadre within the administration support this movement. Third, the pro-West movement, spearheaded by Yoka, the minister of cooperation and director of the president's cabinet, and by Ossetoumba, minister of finance and heir apparent to the President. Fourth, the President's movement. Tchicaya-Thystere acts as its ideologue and has garnered support for the President from several southern tribes. A fifth movement, currently weak, is Abibi's school of "progressive ideological nationalism"--Marxism mixed with radical African nationalism. This movement

has been sharply eclipsed by Abibi's expulsion from the government, despite Sassou-Nguesso's sympathy for his views.

One final identification is necessary. The Bateke have organized a clandestine organization, le Front de Liberation des Batekes et des Bagangoulous (FROLIBABA), to champion their desire for more political power. This group is generally credited with the bombings in Brazzaville in 1982. To counter FROLIBABA, Sassou-Nguesso has support FROBOMA (le Front de Liberation des Mbochis et des Makouas) to promote his own region's interests.

The Government

The Top Leadership

Congo's first four leaders were either murdered or forced out in total disgrace.

President Sassou-Nguesso has been relatively successful in navigating the political waters over the past four years by not becoming a part of any of the major political movements. His strategy has been to play each group off against the other. In the process, he has considerably widened and complicated the various ideological camps present in his regime, thereby confusing potential adversaries and giving him more room to maneuver. Also, Sassou-Nguesso has stocked top government positions with his relatives, friends, and clan members: his brother runs the oil ministry, his nephew is minister of youth (a key political post), and the mayor's office in Brazzaville is full of tribal faithfuls. The President has placed Mbochi tribal clients in other key posts throughout the government, particularly in the armed forces.

Even with such buffers, however, Sassou-Nguesso's power base is precarious at best. One indicator of this occurred when he was unable to change cabinet membership last April as he intended. His recent actions in dismissing Katali, Ntsiba, and Abibi indicate that his position has strengthened somewhat, but he is far from commanding absolute political supremacy. A major test to come will be his attempt to break up several Congolese parastatals. For the hard-line left, the parastatals are a symbol of the government's anti-imperialist position. The left will not allow adoption of Western management procedures without a fight. (The President may circumvent this opposition by creating joint ventures with Western firms and allowing the present parastatals to die off.) A further test will occur during the Party congress scheduled for early 1984. The results will be highly indicative of the current distribution of power. Meanwhile, the President takes extreme caution with his personal security, surrounding himself with an elite, Mbochi, guard. No major attempts on his life have been made, but small incidents (such as a railroad crossing bar dropping suddenly in front of his limousine) have been enough to keep him fearful of plotting.

Institutions

Three major institutions focus political power in the Congo. The military takes a consistently hard-line Marxist stance and gives Moscow a tool with

which to manipulate Congolese politics. In fact, the Soviets count on the military to prevent too much of a tilt toward the West. The Congolese Trade Union Confederation has played key political roles in the past, including toppling President Youlou in 1963. The Union is prohibited from striking, but wildcat strikes occur with relative impunity. Union leaders have been effective in achieving desired changes from the government, changes supporting labor groups and a generally hard-line policy stance. Finally, the PCT maintains a tightly controlled political organization with a limited membership (under 10,000). The Party's politburo is not mentioned in the country's constitutions, but its acts as the supreme policy-making body in Congo. Also, the successor to the presidency in case of presidential "incapacity" would theoretically come from the politburo. The group is elected from the Party at its congresses. A seat on the bureau seems a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for national political prominence and power.

Under these three institutions, the Congolese government extends a "rigidly bureaucratic state structure." A National Assembly and regional assemblies exist but function primarily as sounding boards for popular opinion.

The Mass Base

The Congolese population has a relatively high literacy rate (from 50-80 per cent) for sub-Saharan Africa, but there is little evidence that the populace is more highly politicized than those in other regional countries. The government strictly censors the media, and the tribal (and various other) divisions, fomented by both domestic and foreign agents, effectively maintain the population in a state of political siege.

Over 70 per cent of the Congo's people live in Brazzaville, Point Noire (the main port), or along the rail line between the two. This has made the extension of social services easier--as well as ameliorating the government's task of maintaining control of the economy and political activity.

On balance, the government's social base is limited, tribal, increasingly fragmented, and subject to sudden changes.

The Opposition

In Congo, it is perhaps more useful to ask who supports the government rather than who opposes. For the moment, major opposition seems centered among the Lari. Since Sassou-Nguesso has not suppressed their arch-rivals, the Kongo (as did previous leaders), the opposition has come from movements such as FROLIBABA. In 1982, four bombs shook public buildings in Brazzaville, and a Congolese diplomat was attacked in Belgium. These actions are generally considered to be the work of FROLIBABA. FROLIBABA is one manifestation of the fracturing of the northern ethnic agglomeration that has ruled Congo since 1968.

Opposition within the government centers on the battle between the Moscow faction and the pro-West group. The President's ability to implement

effective economic policy, or badly needed policy reforms, is circumscribed by the left's strict guardianship of Marxist "purity." For the moment, the President is able to control policy decisions to a greater extent than he had previously, but a new coalition against him could change his position very quickly. With the loyalty of the armed forces, the left in effect controls major policy decisions within the government

Economic Management

The Congolese economy has maintained high real growth rates over the past few years, produced principally by expanding oil production and rapidly rising development spending. Most of this investment was in petroleum, but part went to the parastatal sector. The oil boom has fired construction and transportation spending, and the expatriate community has expanded with the flood of foreign petroleum technicians. This scale of activity, however, proved beyond the capacity of the country. The oil boom resulted in increased imports, a balance of payments deficit, and an alarming rundown of reserves. Inflation jumped to 170 per cent (and has remained there). The government has been forced to scale back expenditures and curtail development plans.

The drop in oil prices last year forced further cutbacks and probably was a major impetus behind the country's shift toward the West. Congo has yet to suffer from overspending and "grandiose" projects and has used its oil revenues more wisely than many other countries. Yet two major structural problems continue to drain the economy of vital funds: poor transportation infrastructure, and grossly inefficient and bloated parastatals.

The government has decided to focus on infrastructure investment rather than immediately productive investment in manufacturing or agriculture in an attempt to remedy this situation. Sassou-Nguesso hopes that such an effort to build up economic structures will be the most effective route to greater diversification from a dependency on oil. Investment totalling \$3.2 billion is planned under the 1982-6 development plan, with half of this total going to infrastructure, particularly in projects designed to open up the interior of the country. Projects include completion of the Congo-Ocean railway (to be completed by early 1985) and construction of a pulp plant. The government has no plans to build an industrial sector as such. Industries it now possesses are hampered by wildly unrealistic fixed prices and the collapse of export markets in Zaire.

Foreign companies have invested profitably in Congo, but many of them are long-established French trading companies. The oil sector has attracted a great deal of foreign business in recent years, but the boom may be over already.

Agriculture in Congo contributes 10 per cent of GDP from only 200,000 hectares under cultivation (less than 1 per cent of total land area). The sector suffers from severe manpower shortages, given the concentration of the small national population in the cities. The government has attempted to encourage small farmers over the past few years since almost all food crops are grown by small, private farmers. Policy has shifted from its early emphasis on collectives. Producer prices remain a problem, however. Farm

prices for maize were raised recently, but prices for cash crops are so low that no one wants to grow them. The agriculture sector is scheduled to receive only 3.5 per cent of planned investment under the 1982-6 plan, but government officials point out that the sector will gain from the infrastructural investments designed to augment transportation capacities and open up the interior.

Congo used to be a major sugar exporter, but production fell to almost nothing under poor domestic management. The country has now become a member of the International Sugar Organization and has (under new French and Dutch advisors) increased production from 5-10,000 tons to an estimated 40,000 tons in 1983.

The International Environment

Congo has significantly increased its international ties over the past year as Sassou-Nguesso has courted foreign aid and investment from the West. He has strengthened Congo's relationship with France, visiting France in September and receiving Georges Marchais in October. France remains the country's most important trading partner. The King and Queen of Spain visited Brazzaville in November, with the President lobbying for Spanish support in extracting iron from the Niari region. Over the past year, Congo signed trade or cooperation agreements with Hungary, Egypt, Czechoslovakia, and Brazil. The British have announced they plan to resume diplomatic relations this year. Also, the government received a loan from the European Investment Bank for on-lending to industry, agricultural processing, mining, and tourism projects.

The Soviet Union and Cuba maintain militar advisors in Congo, but only three per cent of Congo's trade is with the Eastern bloc. Soviet economic aid is apparently minimal.

Regional problems have focused on Chad. The government has denied any direct involvement in Chadian problems, but Sassou-Nguesso is known to sympathize with Libyan-supported opposition leader Oueddei. The President discussed Chad in his visit to Paris, but the results of his talks are unknown. Another concern stems from President Bongo in Gabon. Bongo, a Bateke, has offered discrete support to FROLIBABA. This support has been minimal but could become important if the Bateke movement becomes more active.

The Congolese government's ideological bent leads to a further international complication. Sassou-Nguesso's turn to the West is strikingly similar to the hesitant moves by dos Santos in Angola. If Congo's shift continues and is successful (certainly not givens), it could set a practical future course for Angola. This possibility disturbs both African and Soviet Marxists, leading to further leftist pressure.

Pressures For Change

Congo's future course will be determined by five principal variables: (1) domestic oil production and the international oil market; (2) economic

Oil revenues stabilize as the price slowly increases. Soviet aid increases, but not enough to offset losses from Western aid and investment. The economy deteriorates. It is possible that within five years, this radical government could be toppled by labor or even popular pressure if the economic situation deteriorates too far. More likely, however, is a coup by another military faction or one supported by an outside power.

An alternative scenario finds Sassou-Nguesso retaining power for a longer period of time through effective manipulation of the political factions. Western investment and aid, coupled with some progress in economic diversification, lead to increased economic health. Oil revenues rise with the rise in oil prices, an Emeraude is brought on line within two years. Economic prosperity helps to calm political tensions, and Sassou-Nguesso gains an important lever over the radical elements in the PCT.

Given the volatility of Congolese politics, the economy becomes even more politically crucial. Congo also faces a severe ideological battle within its ruling party that could produce violent changes in the political and economic system. The next six months will be critical.

Implications

Profits from deals in the Congo should be accrued only after their checks have cleared.