THE BELGIAN CONGO (I): REVOLT OF THE ELITE

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BELGIAN colonialism—so long admired by paternalists as the most successful experiment in purposeful and gradual colonial evolution—collapsed with a speed that is without parallel in Asia or Africa. How did it happen? And what are the likely consequences of the abandonment by the Belgians of their former policies in the Congo? I will try to answer the first of these questions in this article, and the second in a subsequent one.

At the outset it is important to note that the riots that struck Leopoldville with such sudden anger on January 4, 1959, were the sequel and not the cause of the abandonment by the Belgians of their proud paternalist rule. The causes run much deeper, and there are important lessons to be learned from them by the multi-racial communities of South Africa, Central Africa and Kenya. The Portuguese, too, could, if they chose to lift their blind eye from Goa, learn from the Belgian experience.

The Belgians, on the whole, were quick to understand the implications of the changes that began to occur in the Congo since 1946. They have shown a subtlety and flexibility that are quite remarkable. But whether their new policies will go far or fast enough to secure the aims to which Belgium is now committed remains to be seen. What they hope to achieve now is the peaceful transformation of the Congo into an autonomous African State which will voluntarily agree to enter into a new relationship within a Belgian-Congolese Community.

For the moment, the Belgians realize that the Belgian-Congolese Community is a dirty word with African nationalist leaders, because it was used in the past as a façade for the continuation of colonialism—rather like *apartheid* or *partnership*. The successful resurrection of this idea will depend on whether influential African leaders will choose to make this idea their own. It might well become one of the divisive issues between the rival Congolese nationalist movements. But, at present, the demand for independence is the intoxicating vote-winner.

For the Congolese, independence is a brand-new word. Until quite recently, no African leader dared to use the word in public. It was released like a bullet into the brittle silence of

Congo politics, not by an African, but by a Belgian professor, Dr. A. A. J. van Bilsen. At first, cautiously, and then more boldly, African leaders took up the cry, until its force became irresistible.

The leaders of the independence movement are the Congolese élite who, for years, were the precious show-pieces of the Belgian administration. The creation of an African middle-class was a central feature of Belgian policy: an élite of évolués, it was believed, would become the ally of the Belgians in maintaining stability and pursuing reforms in a slow and orderly fashion.

This idea is not peculiar to the Belgians. It has for long been in the forefront of the thinking of both Lord Malvern and Sir Roy Welensky in Central Africa, and of Michael Blundell in Kenya. To the credit of their political intelligence, it has never been the policy of the Afrikaner Nationalists. Superficially, the concept of a solid African bourgeoisie, with vested interests in the *status quo*, is not without its attractions. What it overlooks is that revolutions are never made by hungry peasants or by slum-ridden working-classes: they are made by the middle-class lawyer, teacher, businessman, doctor and clerk who feels himself capable of doing something concrete about righting the wrongs inflicted upon him. It is the independent-minded citizen who invariably leads the masses: that is why all African and Asian nationalist movements are originally led by middle-class elements. This is what happened in the Congo.

The revolt of the élite began rather obscurely through the formation of what might be likened to old-boys clubs. Because political associations were prohibited in the Congo, the educated Congolese invariably turned to ADAPES (Association des Anciens Elèves des Pères de Scheut) which had followed a rather tranquil course since 1925. Significantly, in the years following the second world war, its membership shot up to 15,000, while its activities were widened to include study circles.

At the same time there was an accretion in the strength of old-boys associations such as Marist Brothers (UNELMA), the Christian Schools (ASANEF), and the schools of the Jesuit Fathers. They formed "circles of the évolués" which spread down to the smallest villages. The Belgian authorities and the Church looked with pride on these developments.

Gradually, the tidily-dressed and ambitious clerks and other salary-earners in the Administration and in Commerce formed themselves in 1946 into a nation-wide association of employees,

APIC (l'Association du Personnel Indigène du Congo Belge et du Ruanda-Urundi). APIC offered a forum for employees to discuss their wages and conditions, their lack of opportunities to rise, and their experiences at the hands of unsympathetic White supervisors; discussions that led straight to questions of ideology, such as equal pay for equal work and the colour bar. The names of practically all the present Congolese leaders figure first as office-bearers in these 'harmless' associations.

Another form of association favoured by the authorities was that devoted to a study of 'social' questions. The best-known of these was UNISCO (l'Union des Intérêts Sociaux Congolais), whose members were mainly secondary school pupils. Their first chairman was the highly respectable senior clerk of the Governor-General. Among the most prominent office-holders of UNISCO and ADAPES was Joseph Kasavubu, today one of the Congo's leading politicians.

Kasavubu is the 42-year-old grandson of a Chinese coolie who worked on the construction of the first Congo railway, and who subsequently married a woman of the Bakongo tribe. The young Kasavubu was educated in Roman Catholic schools, first in the Greek and Latin humanities and later in philosophy and theology. He chose teaching as his career, but forsook it to join the Finance Department of the Governor-General's Office. As if to compensate for his mixed origins, Kasavubu's tribal attachments are particularly strong: they colour the whole of his political ideas. His militant tribal and nationalist consciousness was revealed in one of his earliest addresses to UNISCO, in 1946, which had repercussions for years afterwards.

The programme he unfolded was dynamite for those times: equal pay for equal work; Congolese association with the Administration; an urban charter; abolition of the colour bar in all public places. Equally symptomatic of his thinking was his demand of "Congo for the Congolese" and the "Lower Congo for the Bakongo". This latter demand foreshadowed the formation of *Abako* nearly ten years later, an "Association of the Bakongo for the unification, conservation and expansion of their language."

The formation of tribal associations was the third stage in the development of the Congolese political movement, and flowed directly from the old boys', employees', and social associations. As in South Africa, the Belgian authorities fostered tribal development in the rural areas, and this was carried over into the urban

centres.

The Lower Congo—with Leopoldville as its throbbing capital—lies in the Bakongo territory. The Bakongo once constituted an important African Kingdom, which in the 18th Century extended across both sides of the Congo River and embraced parts of the present Belgian Congo, French Congo and Angola. The Bakongo did not take easily to Belgian rule. They were, at first, slow to send their children to schools, and against Christianity they set their tribal religio-political movement which later grew into Kibanguism *

Unlike the Bakongo, the Bangala tribes from the Upper Congo took quickly to Western association. They established themselves in force in Leopoldville so that, by the time the Bakongo arrived as urban dwellers, the élite of Leopoldville was largely Bangala, and the Bakongo were numerically outnumbered. Thus *Abako* was later established as an instrument to re-assert Bakongo influence in the Lower Congo. This led to tribal opposition between the Bangala and Bakongo associations. *Abako*, under the dynamic leadership of Kasavubu—who came to be spoken of as the uncrowned King of the Bakongo—forged rapidly ahead. Progress for the Liboke-lya Bangala was much more difficult, because they were divided into eight separate tribal units and because they did not have the same negative emotional factors to spur them on.

In 1957, when the Belgians introduced a limited experiment in democratic elections for the major urban councils, the Bakongo's unity and superior organization enabled them to flatten the Bangala in Leopoldville, securing 62% of the total vote. Thus Kasavubu became the mayor of Dendale in Leopoldville: a platform he used with great skill and determination to champion the cause of *Abako*.

But the turning-point in the Congo came well before 1957. The period between 1946-50 had produced the fabric of social and political organizations; between 1950-55 the circles of the élite began to voice demands for social, economic and political reforms. During this decade the Congolese were slowly discovering their right to express political opinions, albeit disguised under polite social and educational cloaks.

By the opening of 1955, the Congo was clearly beginning to

*Named after Simon Kibangu, a Protestant teacher who set himself up as a Messiah. With twelve Apostles he taught a tribal religion in opposition to Christianity and to Whites. He received a life imprisonment sentence after a period of turbulence in 1921, and died a repentant Roman Catholic in 1956.

show signs of discomfort. Increasing political activity among the Congolese was finding few useful and responsible channels for action; while the Belgian authorities, conscious that something had to be done, were tardy and inhibited about making a major move forward. It only needed a catalytic agent to break the uneasy truce. This was the role of Prof. A. A. J. van Bilsen, whose bold intervention in the middle of 1955 started a rapid process which effectively blew the top off the Congo's paternalist pressures.

Van Bilsen, a 46-year-old professor at the University Institute for Overseas Territories at Antwerp, had been interested in Africa all his life. He had taken a law doctorate at the Roman Catholic University of Lovanium with a view to entering the colonial service. But the outbreak of the last war diverted his activities into the Belgian freedom and underground struggles, so that he first set foot in the Congo in 1946. He quickly established wide contacts with both Africans and Belgians and developed an unconventional attitude towards Belgium's proper role in the Congo. But before venturing to express any opinion he travelled in South Africa and later visited many other parts of the continent.

On his return to the Congo in 1954 he formulated his views in an important document entitled "A Thirty Year Plan for the Political Emancipation of Belgian Africa". He criticized Belgium for allowing the Congo to be governed with virtually no parliamentary control, and he attacked the unbalanced growth of industrialization on the basis of the American pattern rooted in social-paternalism. He contrasted the failure of the Belgian Administration in not training a single African doctor, veterinarian or engineer, with the success of the missions in producing hundreds of priests and a bishop. "The Church thus shows," he commented acidly, "that in the backward countries it is a more dynamic and progressive force than the State."

But he went much further. "The colonial imperialism of the past half century is gone forever." Nor did he lament its passing. Provided the Belgians set about purposefully creating fully democratic and economically viable independent states in the Congo and in the neighbouring trusteeship territory of Ruanda-Urundi over a period of 30 years, he felt that Belgium's heritage in Africa would yet be a proud one.

Van Bilsen's programme had an immediate and dramatic impact. Its timing was dead right. In Belgium the Socialist Party

was at long last beginning to find its true voice in colonial affairs. The Roman Catholic Church, led by brilliant thinkers like Father van 't Wing, was becoming increasingly aware of the need to put itself on the side of the growing African consciousness. Both the Socialists and the Roman Catholic Social Action Group reacted favourably to van Bilsen's ideas.

The Congolese took enthusiastically to van Bilsen's views, which lent sanction to their right to talk openly about independence. Thus in the middle of 1956 a group of évolués, writing in "Conscience Africaine" (a Catholic-sponsored publication), openly spoke of political independence for the Congo. Their manifesto spoke of the destiny of the Congo, lying in the heart of Africa, as a great nation of the future. "The colour of one's skin," they said, "offers no single privilege." They warned that the concept of a "Belgian-Congolese Community" was deeply suspect in African minds. But, they quickly added, there would be no hostility towards Belgium provided it undertook sincerely and unequivocally to co-operate in achieving the Congo's independence within 30 years.

Abako was the next to take up the challenge. The authorship of the "Conscience Africaine" manifesto was largely Bangala, and they had gained some advantage over the Bakongo by putting themselves in the vanguard of the demand for freedom. Joseph Kasavubu, speaking at a public meeting in August 1956, criticized the "Conscience Africaine" group as being unwilling to forge the political instruments necessary to implement their ideas. "Our patience," he exclaimed, "is exhausted . . . When the hour comes, a nation will not wait." But even he was willing to accept the 30-year plan, provided the Congolese were actively associated in formulating its details.

But the Belgians made the mistake of ignoring this demand. Their long-promised Study Group to formulate a new policy for the Congo was set up in Belgium with purely Belgian members; nor was there any evidence of an early decision.

It is a characteristic of modern Africa that political events do not move peacefully in ones and twos, but haphazardly at sixes and sevens. Three widely different events helped to speed the process that was to topple Belgium off balance—Gen. de Gaulle's advent to power; the Pan-African People's Conference in Accra; and the World Fair at Brussels.

In August 1958 de Gaulle arrived in Brazzaville, on the bank of the Congo opposite to Leopoldville. There he told the French

Congolese that their choice in the future was between membership of the French Community as autonomous republics, or complete independence. The évolués in Leopoldville cheered de Gaulle. Only two days after his speech, an influential group of évolués addressed a respectful but firm memoire to the Governor-General of the Congo. They criticized the Government's failure to include any Africans in the Study Group. "We fear", they wrote, "that without the co-operation of the Congolese the Study Group will produce a unilateral attitude, inspired by conservatism rooted in a spirit of colonialism, which would seriously upset the Africans." They firmly stated their demand for eventual complete independence.

The leader of this group was Patrice Lumumbu, who now shares with Joseph Kasavubu the distinction of leading Congolese nationalist opinion. Lumumbu first came to prominence as chairman of the "Liberal Friends Circle" in Stanleyville where he was prominent in évolué affairs. After eleven years of exemplary service in the postal service, he was convicted of falsity and sent to prison. On his release he established himself in Leopoldville, where he rapidly gained a reputation as a brilliant pamphleteer and orator. At first his relationship with Kasavubu was strained, but later it improved.

Lumumbu's group followed up their démarche to the Governor-General by creating a new political movement, Le Mouvement National Congolais (MNC). It was the forerunner of a mushroom growth of smaller parties and movements which occurred in the six months spanning the end of 1958 and the beginning of 1959. The aim of MNC was to prepare "the masses and the élite to take control of public affairs"; to speed the process of democratization; to implement the Declaration of Human Rights; and, by peaceful negotiation, to do everything possible to free the Congo from colonialism.

Unlike *Abako*, MNC sought to combat all forms of regional separatism and to create unity in the higher interests of the Congo as a whole. The drift of *Abako* towards regional separatism of the Lower Congo continued. Its old opponents, the Bangala, formed a new group, the Union Progressiste Congolese (UPCO) which pursued the moderate aim of achieving internal autonomy within a Belgian-Congolese Community (rather similar to the French African republics). Like the MNC, the UPCO set itself fiercely against attempts to divide the country on tribal or regional lines.

It was during this time that scores of prominent Congolese leaders were invited by the Belgian Government to attend the World Fair at Brussels. There, for the first time, leaders from all parts of the country found themselves in close and continuous association with each other. Previously many of them had never known each other, and knew little or nothing of each other's ideas. One result of this fortuitous gathering was the gradual development of a new political movement, the Mouvement Pour le Progrès National Congolais (MPNC).

Although the MPNC was not formally launched until after the Leopoldville riots, its seedling time was during the critical last few months of 1958. Its leaders were évolués studying at the missions in Belgium and leaders of élite circles in places like Stanleyville, Coquilhatville, Bukavu, Luluaberg, Elizabethville and Kilo-Moto, as well as Leopoldville. Neither the *Abako* nor the MNC leaders were associated with it, but the Bangala leaders, always anxious to extend their alliances, were among its most prominent supporters. One of its most prominent protagonists was a Protestant, Bertin Tumba.

When it was finally launched, the MPNC fully endorsed the Government declaration of policy issued after the Leopoldville riots. It did not commit itself firmly to either complete independence or internal autonomy. It emphasized the importance of economic and social development, and of national unity. Disunity, it said, would result in "the return to the stagnation of our race, and to our ancestral poverty." A weak national movement would result in disintegration and a return to tribal wars. Much of the manifesto was couched in the kind of language that finds a great deal of favour with settlers and colonial regimes, and which results in its being described as a movement of "moderates."

Finally, there was the third factor which preceded the Leopoldville upheaval—the All-African People's Conference in Accra on December 5, 1958. The Belgian authorities put no obstacles in the way of the *Abako* and the MNC leaders who had been invited to attend the conference. But Joseph Kasavubu failed to make the trip because his innoculation certificates were not in order. Thus only Patrice Lumumbu and his MNC colleagues spoke for the Congo at Accra.

They returned to Leopoldville on December 28 and addressed an enthusiastic mass meeting there. Lumumbu made a full-blooded nationalist speech in which he announced that the MNC

programme fully endorsed the Accra decisions favouring immediate independence for all African countries. (The 30-year programme towards independence was no longer an aim).

Six days later the riots occurred in Leopoldville. Their immediate cause was a march by 30,000 unemployed workers in the city. The *Abako* leaders were arrested and their movement proscribed. No action was taken against the MNC or other parties. In a flash the long delayed reforms for the Congo were announced by the King of the Belgians. He promised independence "without harmful procrastination but also without thoughtless haste."

In the end the *Abako* leaders were never brought to trial. Kasavubu and his principal lieutenants were set free in Belgium and later returned home, where Kasavubu was restored as mayor of Dendale. A parliamentary commission was despatched to the Congo and produced a report of great significance. It has, so far, received very little attention outside of Belgium. This is unfortunate because its analysis of the dilemma of multi-racial societies in Africa is remarkable. I will discuss this report and the subsequent developments in the Congo in a second article.

This political survey will be complete if we examine the political movements that grew up as a result of the Leopoldville disturbances and the Government declaration of independence.

At the time of the Leopoldville riots, the position of the political movements was as follows:

The *Abako*, led by Joseph Kasavubu and Kanza, the champion of independence and of a regional federation of the Bakongo, with a long-term policy of recreating the Kingdom of the Bakongo to embrace parts of the French Congo (now the Congo Republic) and Angola.

The Liboke-lya Bangala, a federation of Upper Congo tribes, favouring internal autonomy within a Belgian-Congolese community, under the leadership of Jean Bolikango.

The National Congolese Movement (MNC) which championed national unity and complete independence for the whole of the Congo, and having an affinity with the Socialist Party of Belgium.

The Congolese Progressive Union with a rather nebulous programme, led by a distinguished Bangala journalist, Mwissa-Camus.

After January, 1959, political parties sprouted like flowers after the rains in the Karroo.

The settlers in the Katanga Province launched the *Rassemblement Congolais* as a "partnership" party with the Congolese, seeking to maintain the higher ideals of European civilization and rejecting all forms of racial discrimination. It favours internal autonomy for the Congo within a Belgian-Congolese Federation.

The fluid Bangala Federation made a new appearance under the title of *Interfederale* which was soon converted into a purely social movement, with the political work entrusted to the *Union Congolaise*, led by Jean Bolikango. It is a federation of tribal or ethnical associations dedicated to the creation of a democratic and independent Congolese nation.

The proscribed *Abako* was succeeded by the Parti Démocrate Congolais (PDC) dedicated to the immediate achievement of independence of the Congo. It also found expression in the Mouvement de Regroupement des Populations Congolaises (MRPC) which expressly advocated the restoration of the old Bakongo Kingdom "on both banks of the Congo, from the Balari to the Loango, the Bambala to the Bawoyo, the Bayaka to the Bassolongo."

The MPNC, dreamed up as I have already described at the World Fair in Brussels, also saw the light of day.

With this proliferation of parties and movements, the Congolese leaders turned their attention towards securing a framework of unity to prevent the divisions in their ranks being exploited by the colonial administration as an excuse for delaying independence. To this end a congress was convened at Luluabourg in April 1959 which was attended by 52 delegates. But the outcome of their talks was indecisive. Nor, indeed, does there seem much hope at present of any great unification movement.

The main divisions between the various parties (aside from tribal distinctions) are over complete independence as opposed to internal autonomy with some form of permanent association with Belgium; national unity or regional separatism; immediate independence or a longer process of decolonialisation. All are agreed on ultimate freedom; on the immediate eradication of racial discrimination; and on the importance of Belgium's continued contribution towards the economic and educational development of the Congo.