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## KINSHASA'S THEATRE OF POWER

**K**INSHASA IS A natural amphitheatre.<sup>1</sup> The older, more affluent districts of the city sit on a flat 'stage' of grey alluvial sand and clay next to the Congo River. Post-colonial suburbs, slums for the most part, have grown up on the red, erosion-prone soil of the 'stands', the ring of hills surrounding this plain. From a vantage point in downtown Kinshasa, with one's back to the river, the arena appears to be one-sided, but you can see both sides from the hills on a clear day. Across the water stands Brazzaville, capital of the Republic of Congo. These are the closest capital cities in the world, bisected only by the great river, and located at the point of a natural gate between the Congo basin and the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>2</sup> Below Kinshasa, the Congo descends via a series of rapids, only becoming navigable again at Matadi, 600 km away.

A recurring theme in the city's history has been the failure to draw large portions of the Congo basin into its orbit. At several points—especially during the early 1960s, and after the fall of Mobutu's regime in 1997—the state based in Kinshasa has had very limited control over much of the country, constituting just one pole among many for the evacuation of commodities to the global economy. The eastern Congolese regions became the fiefdoms of unruly barons, often theoretically commanders in the national army, who played a complex game, juggling between the various power centres. Yet however feeble its grip on the hinterland might be, Kinshasa has always retained its position as first among equals. Whoever manages to rule in the capital will be recognized as sovereign.

And sovereignty grants its holder significant resources: aid and loans; rents from industrial enclaves (however feeble); a veto over who multinational capital can treat with; the power to issue passports and visas; votes to hawk at the UN—all of which tip the scales for Kinshasa over its rivals. The corollary of this is that ‘national politics’ has typically meant, first and foremost, controlling the capital city. This is reflected in, and driven by, an extraordinary creative narcissism that pervades the city.<sup>3</sup> Most ‘national’ politicians have, deep down, been something smaller and more splendid—adept players on the intimate city-stage, patrons of footballers and musicians, handing out largesse to supplicants from the windows of their cars and romancing scandalous beauties; sitting in open-air bars, drinking cold beer and eating slices of catfish steamed in stock and chilli, while paying scant attention to wider conditions.

Beyond the world of formal politics, identities forged by music, religion or networks of informal economic activity have often preserved and reconfigured ideas of exchange and solidarity, allowing the Kinois to maintain a little order at the edge of the void.<sup>4</sup> Examples of this solidarity can be found everywhere in a city that has been more peaceful and better fed than its dire economic situation would lead one to expect. For much of the 2000s, levels of severe malnutrition in the city were comparatively low, in spite of major disruptions to the food supply. HIV was first identified in Kinshasa, but infection rates are lower than in surrounding

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<sup>1</sup> This image is drawn from Léon De Saint Moulin, *Villes et organisation de l'espace au Congo (RDC)*, Tervuren 2010, p. 244. The author would like to thank Saint Jose Inaka Bokulaka, Ian Phimister, and Carlos Sardiña.

<sup>2</sup> Congo-Brazzaville was colonized by the French; its much larger neighbour, the Democratic Republic of Congo, was a Belgian territory during the age of empire. Although there has always been interchange between the two banks of the river, the colonial and post-colonial periods have given them very different histories, adding to the psychological distance between the cities. Once the more peaceful and better functioning of the pair, Brazzaville has been cursed in recent times by abundant off-shore energy reserves, finding itself sucked into the vortex of Big Oil. While conflict in the DRC tends to spare Kinshasa, Brazzaville usually bears the brunt of any fighting. Several recent elections have ended in gun battles on the capital's streets between youth gangs representing the major factions: Remy Bazernguissa-Ganga, ‘Les “guerres électorales” et les mobilisations violentes au Congo-Brazzaville’, in Kadya Tall et al., eds, *Collective Mobilisations in Africa*, Leiden 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Filip De Boeck and Marie Plissart, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City*, Tervuren 2004, pp. 53–4.

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Trefon, ed., *Reinventing Order in the Congo: How People Respond to State Failure in Kinshasa*, London 2004.

countries (and much lower than in southern Africa). The city's relatively cohesive social fabric may have contributed to this, along with the Kinois' grown-up attitude to pleasure: the wild stories about condoms and AIDS that one encounters in South Africa are entirely absent here. Private gun possession is rare; insecurity has grown in recent years, but you can still walk home after dark safely in much of the city, and street-level money-changers sit calmly with thousands of dollars in plain sight.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I will track the origins and development of Kinshasa from the pre-colonial period to its current position as one of Africa's mega-cities, a centre of political resistance and a vibrant cultural hub, whose inhabitants have a vital role to play in the Congo's uncertain future.

### *Origins and growth*

Kinshasa's earliest settlers came for the fish and the fertile soil. The growth of the world economy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries prompted an upsurge of economic activity throughout central Africa, and the area where the city now stands became a huge market: the name of its chief pre-colonial inhabitants, the Bateke, derives from the verb 'to sell'. At some points during this era, the proto-city is thought to have housed as many as 30,000 people.<sup>6</sup> By the late nineteenth century, cargoes of rubber, ivory and slaves were regularly unloaded by boatmen from upriver. Then as now, other poles of attraction drew trade away from Kinshasa: Swahili-speaking Muslim slave traders, drawing finance from as far afield as Gujarat and moving goods east towards the Indian Ocean, had established outposts covering more than half of the area that would become the modern DRC.<sup>7</sup> High prices for ivory and rubber on the world market subsidized the internal transport of slaves, while the dynamics of war and trade increased the demand for dependants to work, marry or be sacrificed within the ritual economy.

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<sup>5</sup> This social solidarity has a dark side: the low crime rates owe something to the fate reserved for petty thieves by ordinary Kinois—if caught, they face severe or even fatal beatings.

<sup>6</sup> Moulin, *Villes et organisation de l'espace au Congo*, p. 217; Charles Didier Gondola, *Villes miroirs: Migrations et identités urbaines à Kinshasa et Brazzaville, 1930–1970*, Paris 1996, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> William Gervase Clarence-Smith, *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century*, London 1989; Robert Harms, 'The World Abir Made: The Margina-Lopori Basin, 1885–1903', *African Economic History*, no. 12, 1983; François Renault, *Tippo Tip: Un potentat arabe en Afrique centrale au XIXe siècle*, Paris 1987.

The first European settlement in the area was established by Henry Morton Stanley in 1881, as part of his great mission to lay claim to the Congo on behalf of the Belgian king, Léopold II. Stanley left the embryonic Léopoldville in the hands of his young disciple Anthony Swinburne. In 1884, Swinburne had to confront the Italian explorer Savorgnan de Brazza, acting in the name of France; Brazza was forced to confine his ambitions to the opposite bank of the river, and a vital bridgehead for Léopold's colonization project was preserved.<sup>8</sup> Belgian officials soon took control of the growing town as the Congo Free State was inaugurated. A railway link between Léopoldville and the port at Matadi was completed in 1898, at a huge cost in human lives, removing the need for goods to be carried overland past the rapids downstream.

While the political geography of Kinshasa is still shaped by pre-colonial imperatives, its demographics mark a profound rupture with that world. Very soon after European settlement began, the former inhabitants of the area, the Teke and the Humbu, were displaced by other groups. This was accompanied by a catastrophic general fall in population throughout central Africa in the late Victorian period: sleeping sickness may have reduced the population of the lower Congo by as much as 85 per cent between 1899 and 1907.<sup>9</sup> In the early days of the colonial city, African newcomers tended to come from the Kikongo-speaking lower Congo—the area between Kinshasa and the sea—or from the forested regions upriver. Many of the latter were recruits to the *force publique*, Belgium's colonial army, where a kind of Bobangi pidgin was employed as the *lingua franca*. This language, dubbed Lingala, became the city's argot. This may help explain why the politics of identity, though still important, appear to be a good deal weaker in modern-day Kinshasa than in many African cities. Inter-ethnic marriage is the norm; hardly anyone claims the city as their unique ancestral terrain; and the Kinois are rarely able to speak the languages of their forebears. A slangy, French-strewn Lingala is the badge of metropolitan sophistication.

The Belgian state assumed control of Léopold's private colony shortly before the First World War, coinciding with a gradual shift away from

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<sup>8</sup> David van Reybrouck, *Congo: The Epic History of a People*, London 2013, pp. 49–52.

<sup>9</sup> Isidore Ndaywel é Nziem, *Histoire générale du Congo: de l'héritage ancien à la République Démocratique*, Paris 1998, p. 343.

the murderously exploitative 'red rubber' period towards a more orderly system of profiteering based on the Congo's vast mineral wealth. Léopoldville had a dual function in the colonial economy. While it was chiefly a hub for the export of primary products to the outside world, with the railways and steam boats a major source of employment for the city's inhabitants, manufacturing for the domestic market also got off the ground, and textiles and brewing became important industries. William Lever's Huileries du Congo Belge (HCB) combined both aspects: the company's vast palm-oil plantations—larger than Belgium itself, and notorious for their brutality—shipped their harvest via Léopoldville, where it would be prepared for export; HCB factories also produced soap for local consumption. However, the Congo's most valuable commodity, copper produced in the south-eastern province of Katanga, was diverted away from Kinshasa, going south instead: first through British territories in southern Africa, later via the Benguela railway to Angola. This established a development pattern whereby the Congo's great cash cow was semi-detached from the rest of the colony, and semi-attached to the British mining complex with its heart in South Africa's Rand, contributing greatly to the secessionist tendencies of the modern state.<sup>10</sup>

In 1926, Léopoldville supplanted Boma as capital of the Belgian Congo. During the inter-war period, the city's population doubled to reach 50,000; by 1959, it would have 300,000 inhabitants, including 25,000 European settlers.<sup>11</sup> This rate of expansion was not held in check by apartheid-style controls on free movement in rural districts, intended to prop up regimes of forced labour: periodic sweeps in the capital would root out those without permits to stay, but more always came to take their places.<sup>12</sup> The colonial city became the centre of a thriving musical culture, influenced by styles imported from across the Atlantic. It also witnessed the first political stirrings among the Congo's African population, as

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<sup>10</sup> Gondola, *Villes miroirs*, pp. 66–7. The Congo's territory is so vast that the capital of Katanga, now called Lubumbashi, is geographically equidistant between Pretoria and Kinshasa.

<sup>11</sup> Van Reybrouck, *Congo*, pp. 164, 249.

<sup>12</sup> The restrictions on internal migration in the Belgian Congo were among the most stringent ever seen. Messianic religions that emerged during the inter-war period would hand out pass documents for access to heaven, indicating the degree of control—both physical and psychological—exerted on a once largely nomadic population.

a challenge to colonial rule gathered momentum in the post-war decades. Having long rejected calls for greater autonomy, Brussels suddenly changed direction at the beginning of 1959, after riots had broken out as crowds emerged from a football match in Léopoldville's King Badouin Stadium, spiralling into disorder that was repressed by the Belgian army at the cost of several hundred Congolese lives. There would be no end to outside interference, however: as the Congo moved towards independence, Belgium and the US worked tirelessly to undermine the government of Patrice Lumumba, whose overthrow plunged the new state into civil war.<sup>13</sup>

### *Opposition capital*

Mobutu Sese Seko came to power in a 1965 coup amidst the chaos of the immediate post-colonial years, offering the Congolese street a respite from the antics of 'politicians' and 'intellectuals', who were, it was said, driving the country into the ground. Léopoldville was rechristened Kinshasa in 1966; the Congo itself became Zaire five years later. Mobutu's bid for popular approval was partly based on his credentials as a supporter of the Kinshasa football team Vita Club—whose rioting supporters had hastened the arrival of independence six years earlier—and of the big band OK Jazz. Both were popular with the 'bills', young Kinois men from poor neighbourhoods who loved cowboy films: they dressed in check shirts, rode bicycle 'horses' (sometimes with lassos), fought with their bare hands and devised an extravagant alternative vocabulary known as *hindou-bill*.<sup>14</sup> Music had become a central part of the city's identity, embedded in webs of patronage and solidarity, honour and obligation. The lyrics of the time were studded with the names of Kinshasa's elite: Patrice Lumumba was recorded in song, as were the rivals who would destroy him, along with powerful women traders, lovers, businessmen, bar owners and furniture salesmen. The name that appeared most frequently, of course, was that of Mobutu himself. Music, dance and dress were the most prominent expressions of *authenticité*, the ersatz-traditional cult of personality nurtured by the regime. The capital's new ruling class were the sponsors of these cultural performances; the art of praising the powerful for money went from strength to strength.

<sup>13</sup> Joe Trapido, 'Africa's Leaky Giant', NLR 92, March–April 2015.

<sup>14</sup> De Boeck and Plissart, *Kinshasa*, pp. 36–40.

This rediscovery of the praise-singing tradition went hand in hand with Zairianization: the redistribution of medium-sized foreign-owned assets to regime insiders, dressed up in the rhetoric of popular nationalism.

During the latter stages of Mobutu's long reign, Kinshasa became the centre of opposition to his regime—a stance it would retain under the rule of Laurent and Joseph Kabila. Up until the mid 1970s, almost everything had gone Mobutu's way, to the point that all possible bases of dissent—rebellions in the interior, radical students, scheming barons—appeared to have been swept away. But then Mobutu's winning streak came to an end, as a cluster of setbacks destroyed his aura of competence: these ills were both economic (plummeting copper prices, inflation, a steep fall in GDP) and political (a farcical military adventure in Angola, followed by an invasion of Katanga by exiled rebels that was only repelled with foreign assistance).<sup>15</sup> In the early years of the dictatorship, the manufacturing base which Kinshasa inherited from the colonial regime had been preserved and even expanded to some extent: Goodyear, Renault, British Leyland and General Motors all set up factories in the city during the 1960s. This trend went into reverse as the foreign loans lavished on Mobutu's regime suddenly dried up, Zairianization wrought havoc with the local economy, and the collapse of agricultural production in the Congolese interior dealt a heavy blow to Kinshasa's role as an intermediary for the world market. Transport links began to disintegrate: eventually there would no longer even be a road linking the Congo's main city to Kikwit, capital of the neighbouring province.

In 1977, Mobutu announced that the latest of the regime's five-year 'mandates' would allow contested elections for the position of 'people's commissars'.<sup>16</sup> This was an innovation that the dictator regretted and reversed as soon as he could, but by then the die was cast. Although all of the commissars had come from the Mobutist stable, they now possessed real mandates and began to ask troublesome questions. The

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<sup>15</sup> Crawford Young and Thomas Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*, London 1985, pp. 376–90; Ndaywel, *Histoire générale du Congo*, pp. 714–49.

<sup>16</sup> These absurd plebiscitary rituals played an important part in the Mobutist political theatre. Luambo Makiadi, the great musician and courtier of the regime, released a campaign single in 1982 with the title *Candidat na Biso Mobutu* ('Our candidate Mobutu'). The record's B-side simply reproduced its A-side: the subtlest of digs at the integrity of the exercise, from an otherwise keen supporter of the regime.

most determined among them later founded the UDPS (Union pour la Démocratie et Progrès Social) under the leadership of Etienne Tshisekedi, who had been one of Mobutu's favourite young technocrats in the 1960s. While other leaders were tempted away with bribes and threats, Tshisekedi remained unbroken, and his house in the central Limete district became a symbol of resistance. Kinshasa was the focus of this political energy: in contrast to the country's second-largest city, Lubumbashi, the opposition there was not fractured along ethnic lines.<sup>17</sup>

The failure of the Kinshasa-based opposition can be partly credited to Mobutu's skill in manipulating his opponents, many of whom were plain opportunists; equally important was the reluctance of Western leaders to offer any assistance to leaders who, like Tshisekedi, were answerable to a popular constituency. It also owed much to the intellectual biases of the opposition leadership, who were drawn from social groups that had initially welcomed Mobutu: lawyers, clergymen and ex-Mobutist deputies. They saw their huge popular support as a source of legitimacy, but not as a way to seize power.<sup>18</sup> By the end of the 1980s, none of the regime's leaders dared to appear on the streets of Kinshasa without an armed guard. But the opposition leadership kept on channeling popular discontent into a pseudo-legalistic framework. When the dictator was forced to negotiate with them, Tshisekedi and his allies were asked to form a government on several occasions, only to be turfed out a few months later. As long as Mobutu controlled the government coffers and its machinery of repression, he would not allow anything that struck at his fundamental interests. When mass looting broke out in 1991, a huge crowd of the *bana tshangu*—some of Kinshasa's poorest and most truculent inhabitants, from the vast slums of Masina and Kimbanseke—

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<sup>17</sup> Mobutu may have been reluctant to play on ethnic divisions in the capital, knowing that 'his' people, the Bangala—a privileged but deeply resented minority—would most likely have borne the brunt of any communal violence. While the dictator repeatedly provoked such conflagrations in other parts of the country, he pulled back from the brink in Kinshasa itself.

<sup>18</sup> The remnants of the more radical movements that had supported the uprisings of the 1960s looked on from across the river in Brazzaville, but only Antoine Gizenga and his *Partie d'Action Lumumbiste* (PALU) managed to build any sort of popular base within the country—and as other Kinois who tried to join PALU discovered, the party was really an ethnic fief for Gizenga's own Pende group, with a support base fixated on the magical powers of its ageing leader.

arrived at Tshisekedi's house in Limete, imploring him to march with them to the *primature* and seize power. Tshisekedi simply told them to go home.<sup>19</sup>

By the time Laurent Kabila and his Rwandan allies swept away the old regime in 1997, Tshisekedi's absorption by the Kinois hall of mirrors was absolute. He allowed himself to be reappointed as prime minister by Mobutu just a month before the dictator fled his country for good. With Kabila already established in Kisangani, Tshisekedi tried to offer him important positions in a government of national unity. Mobutu showed his displeasure by dismissing Tshisekedi after less than a week in office; Kabila, in a strong position, saw no reason to bargain with his old enemies. Once in power, he derided Kinshasa's civil opposition as collaborators. This was self-serving nonsense, but there could be little doubt that the temporizing of the opposition chiefs had led them to squander a historic opportunity, opening the gates to the warlords from the east. The Kinois were spared the worst horrors of the conflict that followed Mobutu's ouster, its ravages largely concentrated in the east. In the post-war elections of 2006 and 2011, the capital voted heavily against Laurent Kabila's son and heir Joseph: raised in Tanzania, with a shaky grasp of French and hardly any Lingala, Kabila  *fils*  was widely detested by the city's inhabitants as a foreign carpetbagger.<sup>20</sup>

### *Dancing on the edge*

The progressive contraction of the economy from the mid 1970s until the early 2000s, which culminated in hyper-inflation and the disappearance of the banking system, made familiar capitalist understandings of wealth, time and even personhood secondary. This did not drive the Kinois towards an imaginative autarky: indeed, the idea of reaching Europe became an obsession for the young and the ruling class alike. But this dream was ultimately focused on a glorious return to Kinshasa. The allure of the mega-city as ritual centre was expressed most forcefully in the culture of the young, who did everything they could to get out, but

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<sup>19</sup> The riots of the early 90s finished off what was left of Kinshasa's industrial base, as the GM plant in Masina was burnt to the ground.

<sup>20</sup> A groundless rumour that Joseph Kabila is not really his father's son but a Rwandan Tutsi called Hyppolite Kanambe remains popular to this day.

also made huge sacrifices in order to return in splendour and perform a kind of potlatch on the city stage, dispensing cash and goods with wild abandon and even engaging in theatrical destruction of property. The *bana lunda*, youths who went to mine diamonds in Angola's Lunda Norte province, struggled in the most appalling and dangerous conditions, then returned to Kinshasa to spend their gains in weeks of riotous living.<sup>21</sup> Another group of young Kinois, the *mikiliste*—those who had gone to *mikili* (Europe)—took big risks with cheque and credit-card fraud, only to splurge the proceeds back home in the most spectacular fashion.

From the late 70s on, young Kinois men—and sometimes women—were characterized by two obsessions: designer clothes and music. Their sartorial obsessions playfully echoed the dapper, suit-wearing functionary who had represented a social ideal for the previous generation, before the collapse of the formal economy had rendered concepts of time-discipline and saving meaningless.<sup>22</sup> Evading easy categorization under the sign of resistance or consumerism, the *sapeur* appears to shimmer with meanings beyond the ken of a Western observer, with his clear-glass Cartier frames, Gaultier kilt, and Hermès umbrella to be opened indoors. Designer clothes stolen in Europe became a kind of social currency. Sometimes clothes were even sent as remittances, to be traded at half the retail price in a system of exchange that relied upon the extraordinary degree of connoisseurship among ordinary Kinois: street children could tell you the going rate for a pair of Versace trousers.

The heroin trafficker and style icon Adrien Mombele—more commonly known as Stervos Niarcos, after a Greek shipping magnate—became an emblem for the generation that came of age in the 1970s. The son of Pierre Mombele, a Bateke noble who was part of Mobutu's inner circle, Niarcos was not himself the product of material hardship. But his iconic status owed everything to the conjuncture. After two generations of economic growth, the young found their prospects to be vastly worse

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<sup>21</sup> Filip De Boeck, 'Domesticating Diamonds and Dollars: Identity, Expenditure and Sharing in Southwestern Zaire (1984–1997)', *Development and Change*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> The *sapeur* phenomenon first began across the river in Brazzaville; the classic sociological treatments of its origins are Justin Gandoulou's two volumes *Dandies à Bacongo: le culte de l'élégance dans la société congolaise contemporaine*, Paris 1989, and *Au cœur de la sape: mœurs et aventures des congolais à Paris*, Paris 1989.

than those faced by their parents. For Kinois with the requisite nerve, crime offered an escape route from the economic wasteland bequeathed by their elders. Graduating from dope smoking with the toughs in his neighbourhood, Niarcos made connections with underworld figures across the river in Brazzaville, where he took part in robberies and discovered the cult of designer clothing.

Back in Kinshasa, the main hang-out for Niarcos and his pals was the 'Village Molokai', a compound in the entertainment district of Matongé that belonged to the musician Papa Wemba. Niarcos became a star through mentions in pop songs that he paid for with clothes stolen from Europe. Cash gradually came to predominate as the currency of choice for songwriters. As record sales collapsed in the 1990s, younger members of the political elite, cheque-fraud superstars based in Paris or London, and émigré diamond dealers all started to invest in this system of prestige, transforming pop records into a kind of social almanac. The economic foundations on which music and dandyism floated have long since crumbled: crackdowns in Europe have shifted the centre of gravity for Congolese fraudsters towards East Asia, or towards Africa's own burgeoning financial sector. There is now a yawning gap between small-scale crookery and the predations of the elite, and the names of diaspora Congolese have largely ceased to feature in popular song, leaving only the luminaries of the political class to shine.

### *Flight to the city*

The Mobutu years saw the population of the capital increase dramatically. Current estimates lie somewhere between seven and nine million, and Kinshasa is expected to reach sixteen million by 2025, surpassing Lagos and Cairo as the largest city in Africa. Much of this growth, especially since the 1990s, has been endogenous: the city has a high birth rate, and the Congolese population as a whole has been rising steadily across the same period, from 20 million at independence to an estimated 67 million today. But Kinshasa, like other Congolese cities, has grown at a rate well above the national average, thanks largely to an exodus from the countryside. Richer Kinois often claim that rural migrants have come to the city for frivolous reasons. It is true that some politicians made wild promises to rural electorates about jobs in the capital during the early years of independence. It is also true that Kinshasa holds a formidable

mystique for the rest of the country. The city's powerful culture industry has drawn many under its spell: rural youngsters can be heard expressing themselves in the cadences of slang Lingala. Other factors are far more important, however. As recent health surveys have shown, on almost every indicator—access to health care, nutrition, education—Kinshasa's urban dwellers are better off than their rural counterparts.<sup>23</sup> Economic implosions in the hinterland, such as the collapse of plantation agriculture and, more recently, a fall in the price of diamonds, have spurred the flight from the countryside.<sup>24</sup>

Violence has also been a crucial stimulus. Controls on internal migration fell apart after independence, and successive waves of conflict in the immediate post-colonial years drove many to flee to Kinshasa. In more recent times, unpaid soldiers began to roam the countryside unchecked, and economic activity consolidated around mafia-like networks.<sup>25</sup> These trends culminated in the 1997–2006 war, accelerating the exodus from rural Congo—although it was the urban centres of the east that attracted the greatest number of war refugees. A more routine kind of violence continues to drive people towards the capital today. Women have often borne the brunt of this everyday brutality. The health survey cited above revealed very high levels of sexual violence throughout the country, with the lowest rates in Kinshasa and Bas-Congo. While the scale of the problem is generally attributed to the war, the highest levels of reported sexual violence were actually to be found in Kasai-Occidental, a province that was relatively peaceful for most of the 1990s and 2000s. In general, women in rural areas were much worse off than those who lived in cities.<sup>26</sup>

Gender-based oppression has long been a stimulus to migration: during the colonial years, state-appointed chiefs—wealthy men in otherwise impoverished areas—paid bride-price on all the available women in a district. Women performed much of the agricultural labour,

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<sup>23</sup> *Deuxième Enquête Démographique et de Santé*, EDS-RDC II 2013–14; Jason Stearns, 'What socio-economic data tells us about sexual violence, *découpage* and living conditions in the Congo', *Congo Siasa Blog*, 27 March 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Young and Turner, *Rise and Decline*, pp. 309–23.

<sup>25</sup> William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*, London 1998; Timothy Raeymaekers, 'Protection for Sale? War and the Transformation of Regulation on the Congo-Ugandan Border', *Development and Change*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> EDS-RDC II 2013–14, pp. 311–3.

and could also be 'lent' to poorer men, or resold at monopoly prices. Despite the best efforts of the colonial authorities, women fled these miniature despots for the city in large numbers, often finding themselves without legal means of support in the new urban environment. Transient, remunerative relations with men became a career choice; the most successful took many lovers, formed savings clubs that met in bars, and became icons of fashion and popular music. This generated a moral panic on both sides of the racial divide, giving rise to legislation that banned multiple wives and imposed taxes on 'theoretically single women' in urban areas. Marriage was defined in opposition to the public sexuality associated with spaces like the bar and the street: the *ndumba*, a kind of prostitute or courtesan who existed outside the lineage-based economy of bride-wealth, stood in contrast to the *mwasi ya libala*, the woman of marriage.<sup>27</sup>

A caste of high-status courtesans remains a notable feature of modern Kinshasa. This category includes many women who operate in the public domain: journalists, bar owners, musicians and members of high-profile savings clubs. There is a scandalous prestige accompanying such figures, and the energetic pursuit of the courtesan vote has been one of the more amiable features of recent electoral contests. But the freedom of Kinois women is still restricted by social convention, and the contrast between the 'daughter of the home' (*mwana palais*) and the 'daughter of the street' (*mwana libanda*) continues to govern female behaviour. Women who carry out their business in public are liable to be classified as *ndumba* by default.

### *Growing pains*

The city's growth has put enormous strain on its built environment. Urban planning by the state effectively came to a halt after the Belgians left. Kinshasa's planning authority did produce a series of blueprints in the period following independence, with help from the Mission Française d'Urbanisme (MFU), a French government body. These blueprints assumed higher levels of car ownership than were realistic, and did not

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<sup>27</sup> Nancy Rose Hunt, 'Noise over Camouflaged Polygamy, Colonial Morality Taxation, and a Woman-Naming Crisis in Belgian Africa', *The Journal of African History*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1991; Tshalika Biaya, 'La Culture urbaine dans les arts populaires d'Afrique: analyse de l'ambiance zaïroise', *Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1996.

anticipate the actual rate of population growth. While the MFU steered through some French-built tower blocks in downtown Kinshasa, adding to Zaire's debt burden, little else of what was promised in the plans ever materialized, and the French finally packed up and left in 1977.<sup>28</sup> A few other countries, notably Maoist China, have left their mark on the city, chiefly in the form of monuments. But for the most part, Kinshasa's growth since 1960 has been the chaotic, unplanned work of its inhabitants. The age of settlements can easily be gauged by the height of the mango and avocado trees that were planted by the first pioneers.<sup>29</sup>

Economic segregation is looser than in many conurbations of the global South. Although Kinshasa's central districts tend to be far more affluent than its periphery, there are significant numbers of poor people living in almost every part of the city. The wealthiest neighbourhoods are to be found in Gombe, Bon Marché, Mbinza and Limete, while the greatest concentration of poverty is in east Kinshasa; Tshangu, an area that includes the communes of Ndjili, Kimbanseke and Masina, contains some of the world's biggest slums. Right across the social spectrum, Kinois districts usually possess a strong collective identity: people will talk of themselves as *bana quartier* (literally, 'children of a quarter'). Denizens of Gombe are snobs who always want to speak French and refer to their area as 'La Gombe'; their counterparts in Bandal and Lemba argue furiously about which district should be known as Kinshasa's Paris (Bandal for its fashion and nightlife; Lemba, with its university, for the intellectuals). Pop groups rely heavily on the support of certain areas when building a fan base.<sup>30</sup> Tshangu has the strongest identity of all. During moments of political strife, its entrance can be barricaded, and the descents of the *bana tshangu* on the city centre carry a strong insurrectionary charge.

The neighbourhoods created during the early post-independence years were eventually recognized by the authorities and provided with water and electricity supplies. Ambitious politicians offered patronage

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<sup>28</sup> Luce Beeckmans, 'French Planning in a Former Belgian Colony: A Critical Analysis of the French Urban Planning Missions in Post-Independence Kinshasa', *OASE Journal for Architecture* 82, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Moulin, *Villes et organisation*, p. 244.

<sup>30</sup> Oddly enough, the same does not hold true for football clubs: allegiance is strictly random throughout the city.

and protection to certain areas, easing their passage to formal status. There was more to be gained through the city's expansion than populist legitimacy, of course: generations of politicians and bureaucrats made a killing from bribery and speculation as the public lands encircling Kinshasa were settled. By the 1980s, the state's role in providing services had atrophied. Road building and maintenance ground to a halt; the tacit convention that new settlements would eventually be hooked up to the municipal grid was abandoned. Kinshasa's main source of electricity, the vast hydroelectric power station at Inga, became severely dilapidated, operating well below full capacity. Sub-stations in the city itself fell into disrepair, and greater demand was placed on a diminishing supply as new districts hot-wired cables to existing power sources.

In Kinshasa today, officials try to manage the crumbling power network with localized black-outs, which residents in turn try to circumvent with yet more improvised cables, resulting in a chaotic tangle of unmapped secondary circuitry. Evening strolls in the city are often illuminated by these cables—known colloquially as *machopo ya courant* (electricity intestines)—glowing red in the unlit streets. Alarming enough at the best of times, this poses a particular hazard during rainy season, when pools of rainwater can be electrified: the singer Celeo gave voice to the fears of many Kinois with his refrain *Mwana asubela courant* ('the kid peed on the electricity current'). Even relatively privileged areas of the city can go without power for months at a time, and wood or charcoal are typically used for energy-intensive tasks like cooking, with predictably dire consequences in terms of air pollution and deforestation of the hinterland. The incongruity of this situation, in a country with some of the world's most powerful hydroelectric dams, is not lost on the Kinois. The water supply has also become markedly unreliable, especially on higher ground, where people leave the tap on overnight with a bucket underneath, hoping for a trickle.

It would be wrong to paint a picture of unmitigated decline in Kinshasa's infrastructure, as the last fifteen years have witnessed a lopsided growth of sorts. The road network has begun to recover, having reached a point in the early 2000s where surfaces had disappeared entirely in many areas.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> When it rained, the main route to the university entailed dismounting from a combi-taxi, paying street children a small fee to carry one across a thigh-deep puddle, then boarding a new taxi on the other side.

Roads are still extremely poor in residential neighbourhoods, but the main arteries have been transformed with the help of concessional loans from the Chinese. A limited municipal bus service has been inaugurated, covering busy routes on the new roads at rush hour. Mobile-phone networks have expanded dramatically, resulting in a boost for government revenues, but also creating job opportunities for many ordinary Kinois as sellers of phone credit.

### *Remaking Kinshasa*

The most profitable area of urban development, however, has been housing, something which has proved to be much less of a boon for the average citizen.<sup>32</sup> From the 1980s on, property prices rose as regulation was progressively undermined. This trend began in central neighbourhoods where legal restrictions on the size of deposits were surreptitiously negotiated away, along with a ban on the dollarization of rental agreements. In the early 90s, rents and house prices lurched upwards in many parts of Kinshasa: this may have been caused by the return of successful emigrants from Europe and *bana lunda*, diamond miners who had made their money in Angola, paying for houses in cash. There was also a bubble stemming from pyramid schemes set up by figures in the Mobutist elite: in the frenzy to participate, many middle-class Kinois sold their houses and became renters.<sup>33</sup> By the time these schemes collapsed, the pool of renters had expanded substantially. After a brief hiatus during the rule of Laurent Kabila, prices took off again. Old Mobutist cadres sold their homes in central Kinshasa to cronies of the new regime, or rented them out to the contingent of aid bureaucrats who arrived with the UN.<sup>34</sup> Small houses in downtown areas like Gombe now change hands for well over a million dollars, while

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<sup>32</sup> The following analysis is largely based on conversations with informal estate agents in Kinshasa.

<sup>33</sup> Bogomil Jewsiewicki, 'Jeux d'argent et de pouvoir au Zaïre: la "bindomanie" et le crépuscule de la deuxième république', *Politique Africaine*, vol. 46, no. 55, 1992.

<sup>34</sup> Foreigners are considered desirable tenants not only because of the high rents they can afford to pay, but also because they can be relied upon to actually cough up, unlike the local worthies who will invariably try to use their connections to renege on a deal. One acquaintance of mine had to park a clapped-out banger in front of a Jeep belonging to a well-paid political adviser who owed him thousands of dollars in back rent; he eventually received the Jeep itself in lieu of payment.

apartments can be rented to foreigners for at least \$5,000 a month. The property boom also produced a ripple effect, as sellers and renters 'downsized' into neighbourhoods further out. To add fuel to the fire, Congolese elites received a cash bonanza from high mineral prices on the world market: with few other investment opportunities available in the local economy, property speculation became one of their preferred outlets, perhaps second only to capital flight.<sup>35</sup>

This hike in prices, combined with the chaotic state of the cadastral register, has inspired a series of violent conflicts over unbuilt areas of the city, in which alliances are struck between self-proclaimed customary chiefs, political factions, and foreign or expatriate capital.<sup>36</sup> This is sometimes linked to the growth of exclusionary spaces—gated communities and shopping malls—which have lately begun to appear in Kinshasa, having been entirely absent before 2006. These projects look to Dubai or Guangzhou for inspiration as well as for finance. The Cité du Fleuve, a gated community of luxury dwellings, built in the otherwise impoverished neighbourhood of Kingabwa on land originally reclaimed from the river by rice farmers, is perhaps the most extreme example of such surreal late-capitalist flourishes.<sup>37</sup> At Lemba Foire, a Chinese building consortium is now developing municipal land, much of which was formerly assigned to run-down but densely-populated tenement blocks. Drawing on the rhetoric of 'urban regeneration' so beloved of land profiteers everywhere, their new plans include provision for a thousand alleged 'social housing' units, priced at \$217,000 each.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> In 2012, a dissident member of the ruling party alleged that Adolphe Muzito, then serving as prime minister, had managed to acquire at least 57 properties in prime Kinshasa locations: Alex Engwete, 'Kleptocracy alley (redux)', *Alex Engwete Blog*, 12 March 2012. Contacts of mine who have collected property taxes in downtown Kinshasa—or at least attempted to do so—confirm the general picture of a ruling class whose members have put together big property portfolios.

<sup>36</sup> Inge Wagemakers and Oracle Makangu Diki, 'Governance of Urban Agricultural Space in Kinshasa: Struggle for Land (DRC)', in An Ansoms and Stefaan Marysse, eds, *Natural Resources and Local Livelihoods in the Great Lakes: A Political Economy Perspective*, London 2011; Filip De Boeck, 'Inhabiting Ocular Ground: Kinshasa's Future in the Light of Congo's Spectral Urban Politics', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 26, no. 2, May 2011.

<sup>37</sup> De Boeck, 'Inhabiting Ocular Ground'.

<sup>38</sup> Radio Okapi, 'Kinshasa: des "logements sociaux" hors de prix à la Fikin', *Radiookapi.net*, 8 October 2014.

When capital is scarcer, elite factions set their sights on a less ambitious goal: to displace one set of poor people and replace them with others looking for somewhere to live. In one high-profile case, a group of rice farmers were locked in battle with a syndicate that was hoping to build slums on their land, and which counted government ministers and police officers among its members. The farmers, who were astute and rather lucky in their own alliances, appear to have won this battle—at least for the time being—after a series of terrifying confrontations with the police, during which they were shot at with bullets and tear gas: one farmer was killed, another imprisoned for over a year, with several more left permanently maimed. One of their leaders, a gentle, articulate woman in late middle age, had all her teeth knocked out with the butt of a policeman's rifle.

The success of the rice farmers owed much to the fact that, most unusually, their representatives in the regional parliament and the national assembly—Gerard Mulumba ('Gecoco') and his brother Leon—had championed their protests. Gecoco helped the farmers' cause by manipulating factions within the government and publicizing their struggle in the media. He is generally held to be a minor crook, and has floated on the margins of Kinshasa's theatre of power for almost two decades, adopting a typically flamboyant style. Yet his grounding in the community where he lives has gradually pushed Gecoco towards a more genuine populism: he has given away a substantial part of his income to build small bridges in the flood-prone Kingabwa constituency, and to cover the cost of funerals and hospital visits. Now that he has started to challenge elite interests on behalf of his constituents, Gecoco has become the focus of a minor personality cult among the inhabitants of Kingabwa. Such African populism is pathologized in the mainstream political science literature as a barrier to development. But whatever its faults, street-level politics of this kind, which tries to establish a more generous social contract between Kinshasa's poor majority and the ruling class, may be the best hope for progress in the years ahead.

### *Patronage and praise*

The obsession with performing upon the intimate stage of the city means that some of the resources that appear to have been siphoned away through corruption end up being spent in Kinshasa anyway.

During Mobutu's reign, courtiers like Justin Bomboko, a CIA favourite who made a fortune smuggling Zaire's coffee exports across the border, spent much of the money on women and song in the capital.<sup>39</sup> More recently, the same dynamics have been at work in the extraordinary growth of the city as a media hub. During the post-conflict transition, no fewer than forty free-to-air television stations were launched, nearly all with the backing of important figures from the ruling class. This has generated a lot of jobs for the children of the decayed middle class, although the wages rarely even cover the transport costs. The proliferation of TV stations in one of the world's least promising advertising markets cannot be separated from the tradition of praise-singing. Most journalists rely on payments from wealthy patrons to top up their negligible salaries: such patrons can be the subject of a fawning interview, or a 'news' report on their triumphant progress through one of Kinshasa's neighbourhoods.

Ordinary citizens frequently turn to *les grands* for protection. When Kinois have recourse to the law, for example—which they often do in this surprisingly litigious city—they have their money ready. Bribing a judge can be risky: pay too soon and he may get a better offer; too late and the matter is already settled. Better to have your *grand* let it be known that he is taking an interest. This contributes to a Lilliputian environment, where key members of the government and its security apparatus are constantly being asked to throw their weight behind the protagonists in bizarrely small-scale disputes. Control of high party and ministerial positions also grants one the right to sell jobs to the highest bidder, resulting in bitter intra-party struggles over seemingly trivial appointments: in 2013, one PALU cadre was killed in a dispute over the naming of a new permanent secretary.<sup>40</sup> Lower down the food chain, every interaction with state officials is lubricated by unofficial fees and fines. Kinshasa's main prison, Makala, swells during the day as an army of go-betweens take food and medicine to the prisoners in return for a payment to the otherwise penniless guards. \$400 is enough to spring you from police detention for a wide variety of crimes. Civil-service jobs are now the only kind of formal-sector employment that retains much significance,

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<sup>39</sup> Turner and Young, *Rise and Decline*, pp. 60–2.

<sup>40</sup> 'Incidents avec mort d'homme au siège du Palu: exclusions et poursuites judiciaires annoncées', *Le Potentiel*, 2 December 2013.

but even here the official salaries are well below the cost of living, and arrears often stack up for months at a time: the main value of such positions lies in the opportunity they present for informal graft.

These webs of solidarity and exchange, politics and criminality, can also be seen at work in the religious sphere. The Catholic and Protestant churches that dominated Kinshasa during the colonial period and for some time afterwards largely ignored the indigenous religious practices known as *kindoki*, leaving the field clear to local elders and neighbourhood *ngangas* to perform a variety of community services, such as consulting with ancestors, or prescribing charms that would ensure success in the pursuit of love, money and exam results. This division of labour broke down as a Pentecostal wave swept through Congolese cities from the 1990s, initially driven by American missionaries but quickly passing into the hands of local pastors. On the one hand, *ngangas* were denounced as agents of Satan in the Manichean theology of the Pentecostals. As social bonds fractured under the strain of economic hardship, the churches became a forum for the condemnation of witchcraft, with old people and children especially vulnerable. On the other hand, aspects of the central African political tradition that had only exerted a subterranean influence since colonial times were unwittingly brought back into public life by the Pentecostal movement.

Spirit possession and the channelling of blessings via gifted intermediaries—blessings which could include pregnancy, car ownership or a trip to Europe—all now fell within the province of the Church. Prosperity being a sign of divine favour, God's ambassadors came to be judged on their displays of wealth. Such metrics included the size of a pastor's church, the quality of its air-conditioning system, and the opulence of his clothing (carrying on the *sapeur* tradition). This imperative to serve God and Mammon naturally brought the Pentecostal churches into the realm of get-rich-quick schemes. Certain pastors became known for offering visas as well as blessings to help people on their way to Europe, most often secured through the pastor's association with the document-forging workshops which thrived before biometric data became standard. Along with relentless demands for *mabonza* (contributions) from their flocks, religious figures sought to raise funds in other ways. Tele-evangelists such as Frère Mukuna and Sony Kafuta ('Rockman') took to the airwaves, urging the faithful to vote for Kabila, as did the

spiritual leader of the Kimbanguist Church, who is believed by his followers to be the (rather portly) embodiment of the Holy Spirit.<sup>41</sup>

### *Law and disorder*

The descendants of the *bills* who supported Mobutu in the 60s are still very much a part of Kinois life, and keen as ever on music, martial arts and football.<sup>42</sup> The fleeting alliances struck between these youths and *les grands* are an important aspect of the city's political life, although they rarely translate into lasting pacts (as one popular song put it: 'You are bringing us beer and stuff to eat? We'll eat it with rice but we don't choose you!'). The stadium of Vita Club remains a crucible of popular insurgency: policemen openly confess their terror at the prospect of local derby matches, where ultras will throw rocks at the players and remind the referee of where his house is. Riots provoked by defeats can rapidly assume a political character, and the chants which echo around the stands often convert the latest pop songs into barbs directed at the president. The club is now owned by General Amisi Kumba, former second-in-command of the DRC's army. Before his recall to Kinshasa, General Amisi was posted in the east, where he was accused of profiting from illegal mining.<sup>43</sup> Investment in a team that commands the loyalty of so many Kinois seems like a shrewd move for a dissident baron whose political status is uncertain.

In similar fashion, the leaders of popular fighting *dojos* are frequently recruited by political factions for their ability to mobilize (and perhaps

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<sup>41</sup> Religion can also be a vehicle for popular dissent. 'Archbishop' Fernando Kutino, otherwise known for his designer outfits, took to the airwaves during the 2006 election campaign with fire-and-brimstone anti-regime preaching. He was rewarded with a trumped-up charge of weapons possession and attempted murder, and was found guilty and sentenced to twenty years in prison, in spite of the collapse of the prosecution case.

<sup>42</sup> Leon Tsambu-Bulu, 'Musique et violence à Kinshasa', in Theodore Trefon, ed., *Ordre et désordre à Kinshasa: Réponses populaires à la faillite de l'État*, Paris 2004; Katrien Pype, 'Fighting Boys, Strong Men and Gorillas: Notes on the Imagination of Masculinities in Kinshasa', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 77, no. 2; Kristien Geenen, "'Sleep Occupies No Space": The Use of Public Space by Street Gangs in Kinshasa', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 79, no. 3, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Fessy, 'Congo General "Profits From Blood Gold"', *BBC News*, 10 November 2010.

neutralize) sections of the popular classes. This complements the practice of paying people to show up at electoral rallies: five dollars is the going rate for attendance, with more for those offering some kind of protection or a show of force.<sup>44</sup> One major political confrontation in the capital in 2010 pitted the television mogul and MP Puis Muabuilu against Deogratias Indulu; both men belonged to rival factions in Joseph Kabila's PPRD (Parti du Peuple pour la Reconstruction et la Démocratie) movement. At a local party conference, this stand-off resulted in violent clashes between supporters of the two factions: Indulu carried the day with the help of 'Chaleur', a former African judo champion, and his young followers. In the national election that followed, Chaleur and his heavies brought crowds along to PPRD rallies, while sabotaging opposition gatherings and burning the UDPS headquarters to the ground.<sup>45</sup> The electoral logic of all this was obscure, as the antics of Chaleur and his followers often increased the hostility of Kinshasa to the regime. Chaleur and Indulu were themselves forced to flee under army protection when locals started to pelt a pro-Kabila rally in Matete with the contents of a nearby iron market (the locals later set off to 'teach Chaleur a lesson' in his home district of Ngaba, and were only driven back by gunfire).

The use of poor young men during the election campaign fed into a burgeoning panic about the *koluna*—a term which refers to machete-wielding thugs said to be taking over Kinshasa, who are unsurprisingly linked in the popular imagination with the Kabila regime. Seeking to improve its image, Kabila's government turned to punitive populism in 2013 with *Opération Likofi* ('operation uppercut'). Police death squads armed with shotguns were sent out in pick-up trucks at dusk to eliminate repeat offenders. As the operation gathered momentum, a hotline was set up allowing citizens to 'shop a *koluna*'; a jazzy haircut or flipflops—supposedly telltale *koluna* signs, but really just the uniform of Kinshasa who are young, poor and male—could prove fatal. Human Rights Watch recorded at least 53 confirmed executions.<sup>46</sup> Government

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<sup>44</sup> One respected fixer told me that he arranges protection for events in return for a payment of \$1,500: \$500 for himself, \$250 for his lieutenant, and \$25 each for thirty men fuelled by beer, whiskey or dope.

<sup>45</sup> Not that Tshisekedi's followers were entirely pacific themselves: UDPS supporters had thrown petrol bombs at PPRD buildings the previous day.

<sup>46</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Operation Likofi: Police Killings and Enforced Disappearances in Kinshasa, DRC*, New York 2014; Kristien Geenen, 'Operation Likofi: Cleaning the Streets with a Punch', African Studies Association conference presentation, 2014.

ministers issued smirking denials that were purely intended for foreign consumption: nobody in Kinshasa was fooled.

### *Endgames*

Tragedy and farce have never been clearly distinguished as dramatic modes on Kinshasa's political stage. Joseph Kabila's second term expires at the end of 2016, but there is little sign that he or his party will scurry off quietly. As the date of departure draws near, the attempts by Kabila's entourage to cling on to power grow ever more farcical, but also seem reminiscent of Mobutu's ragged and tragic playing for time. Kabila himself has rarely looked comfortable in Kinshasa. He has never mastered Lingala, its principal tongue; in a city where higher education is a kind of religion, with qualifications flaunted, he lacked a university degree for many years. He often appears queasy during public appearances, and spends much of his time at a ranch outside the city. In this most loquacious of capitals, the most visible mark of Kabila's personality comes not from his rare public pronouncements, but from his love of driving: he refuses to employ a chauffeur, driving himself in and out of the city at high speeds as part of the presidential cavalcade.

While Kabila's allies search for pretexts to delay the coming election, the security forces have cracked down on dissenters. In June 2015, police raided a meeting in Kinshasa organized by Filimbi, an umbrella movement of Congolese youth groups, and arrested the participants. Two were later charged with 'conspiracy against the state' and incitement to revolt; if found guilty, they could face the death penalty. The regime seemed to be especially spooked by the presence of activists from Burkina Faso and Senegal at the meeting: in both countries, youth-led popular mobilizations recently forced the departure of leaders who wanted to extend their time in office indefinitely. A new generation of Congolese student activists have been inspired by these examples and are willing to put themselves in harm's way. The political opposition would no doubt be happy to make use of their bravery in order to oust Kabila and take power. But the most plausible candidate for the presidency, one-time Katanga governor Moïse Katumbi, has been keen to offer assurances to power-brokers at home and abroad (not least the mining companies), and is unlikely to make any kind of serious break with the past if he replaces Kabila.

Many Kinois are hungry for change: for now, the street is more than happy to sing the constitutionalist songs promoted by activists, opposition politicians and the Catholic Church. When the DRC's football team returned victorious from a championship final in February 2016, they were greeted at the airport by fans chanting 'Kabila know it, your mandate is over!', subverting the regime's bid to make propaganda hay from the event. But while the poor majority are not indifferent to the liberal demands of better-educated activists, something more robust would be needed to transform them into a reliable political force. The Burkinabé activists whose presence troubled the Congolese authorities so greatly owed much of their effectiveness to the memory of Thomas Sankara, and to the country's more established Jacobin tradition: this meant that the popular classes had no trouble grasping the link between constitutional questions and their own economic concerns. In the DRC, on the other hand, no major politician views the economic populism of the poor as anything but a parlour game. For now, the theatre of elite distribution that characterizes the culture of Kinshasa remains nothing more than an act.