

Patrice Lumumba and the unfinished business of liberation

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When the First All-African People's Conference (AAPC) took place under the leadership of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah between December 5 and 13, 1958, I was a teenager in the Belgian Congo. I was a student in the first year of a Presbyterian-Methodist secondary school, which eventually expelled me in April 1960, two months before our independence, for my anticolonial activism. These American missionaries had somehow forgotten that they had played a role in our political awakening, not only in provoking our anger by echoing the racist colonial propaganda that Africans could not govern themselves, but also by furnishing our student center with a powerful radio from which we could get news from international broadcasters such as the Voice of America and the BBC plus all the major newspapers published in Kinshasa (then Léopoldville), including those of the principal Congolese political parties.

The Political Rise of Patrice Lumumba

Patrice Lumumba, who was just emerging as a nationalist leader following his election as president of a new and multiethnic political party, the Mouvement National Congolais (MNC) or *Congolese National Movement* in October 1958, spoke to his first Pan-African audience on December 11 at the Accra Conference. He and two other MNC colleagues made the trip to Accra thanks to financial support from the Pan-African Freedom Movement for East and Central Africa (PAFMECA) obtained on their behalf by A.R. Mohamed Babu of Zanzibar (Tanzania) and Tom Mboya of Kenya. [\[1\]](#)

The Accra conference took place at a very propitious moment in Lumumba's life. Having left his 12-year civil service career as a postal employee and a leader in African elite organizations fighting to gain better entitlements and privileges in the colony, he was then employed as the publicity director of the second largest brewery in Kinshasa, but was contemplating working fulltime as a leader in the national struggle for independence. Nearly two weeks in Accra interacting with progressive heads of state and leaders of radical liberation movements involved in armed struggle helped solidify his *volte-face* or total rupture with the assimilationist positions of middle-class African *évolués*. [2] As Frantz Fanon has described them, these gentlemen had "a wish to identify permanently with the bourgeois representatives from the metropolis." [3]

The rupture with Lumumba's earlier ideas was evident in his speech to the Accra conference. He no longer perceived colonialism as a harbinger of Western civilization in Africa. It was, on the contrary, a system of exploitation and injustice. Colonial invaders like Henry Morton Stanley – the Welsh-American adventurer – and their successors were no longer heroes to be admired, but racists with an idiotic superiority complex. As for the objective of the political struggle undertaken by the Congolese people, it was no longer a fight for racial equality in a Belgo-Congolese community, but for their total liberation from colonialism and the attainment of full independence.

Thanks to Accra, the notions of freedom and development that Lumumba had been wrestling with since July 1956 became very clear in December 1958. Independence did not mean the embourgeoisement of the so-called educated Africans: the assimilated of French or Portuguese colonies, the "black Englishmen" of the newly independent Ghana, Nigeria and other British colonies, or the Congolese *évolués*. It meant freedom or liberation for all from economic exploitation, political

repression and cultural oppression or racism in all its forms. This independence was not to be granted on a silver platter like Charles De Gaulle did in 1960, in repudiation of his own French Community of 1958. Africans were to rise up to seize independence on their own initiative. While the ultimate aim was and still is the establishment of the United States of Africa, the most immediate task then was the implementation of a national project of democracy and development through self-determination politically, self-reliance economically, and pan-African solidarity throughout the continent and including the African diaspora worldwide.

This is the message with which Lumumba returned to Kinshasa, and one he delivered to the people at a public rally on the AAPC on Sunday, December 28, 1958. On January 4, 1959 – the following Sunday – after the refusal by the Belgian mayor of Kinshasa to authorize a rally called by the Alliance of Bakongo (ABAKO) of Joseph Kasavubu, who was frightened of losing the leadership of the independence struggle to Lumumba's MNC, an urban rebellion shook the city for four days. A week later, on January 13, both the Belgian king and his government made two separate declarations announcing that they were ready to start discussions on the independence of the Congo. Thanks to the AAPC, January 4, 1959 is commemorated in the Congo today as Independence Martyrs Day, and Lumumba, whose own martyrdom occurred two years later, on January 17, 1961, is our country's national hero. His effective tenure as prime minister lasted for two months and a half, from June 30 to September 14, 1960, and he was assassinated in the Katanga province, which had declared its independence with Belgian support on July 11, 1960.

The assassination of Patrice Lumumba

The strategic importance of the Congo to the Western powers was such that unlike other martyrs of the liberation struggle who were assassinated directly by their respective colonial powers, the demise of Patrice Lumumba, had to involve the

leader of these powers, the United States of America. In the Congo case, what was at stake in 1960 concerned more than the interests of the former colonial power. Lumumba became a victim of a counterrevolution involving the whole African subcontinent from Katanga to the Cape of Good Hope. Mining companies and white settlers in this region were reluctant to cede their political power and economic privileges to the forces of pan-Africanism and African nationalism. For as long as they could, they retained power with the support of Western powers, most of whom were convinced that Europeans and their descendants were better protectors of Western economic and strategic interests than Africans.

Geographically and economically, the Katanga area of the Copperbelt has long been an integral part of the Southern African economic complex, a relatively interdependent region of world capitalism with a highly developed industrial structure in South Africa and an abundance of mineral resources in all major countries. South African capital had been invested in nearly all countries of the region through corporations such as the British South African Company (BSAC), Tanganyika Concessions Ltd. (Tanks or TCL), Anglo-American, Consolidated Gold Fields and De Beers. The development of mining and related industries in Katanga attracted white South Africans and Rhodesians to the Belgian Congo. With these hardcore racists as their reference groups, Belgian settlers sought to create a colonial settler system comparable to the apartheid and other white minority systems of Southern Africa.

The prospects of independence under a radical nationalist government led by Lumumba brought a rapprochement between the corporate leaders, led by the top management of the Union Minière du Haut-Katanga (UMHK), the largest corporation in the colony and a subsidiary of the Belgian corporate giant, the Société Générale de Belgique (SGB). With the support of the Belgian government and its NATO allies, plus lobbying efforts of right-wing circles in Western countries, particularly the

United States and Britain, mining companies and white settlers felt that their time to seize power had come.

Since Brussels was not willing to set up a government of white settlers on the models of South Africa and Rhodesia and Nyasaland (now Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe), the solution was to set up a fake government with black politicians, but one actually run by Belgian civil servants and military officers. The first Belgian shadow government was known as the Belgian Technical Mission in Katanga (Mistebel), which administered the province from July 22 to August 26, 1960. It was led by Count Harold d'Aspremont Lynden, a nephew of Count Gobert d'Aspremont Lynden, the grand marshal of the royal court or chief of staff of the Belgian King Baudouin I. As minister of African Affairs after leaving Katanga, the younger d'Aspremont Lynden became the supervisor of his successor, Dr. René Clemens, professor of sociology at the University of Liège, who served as head of the Katanga Advisory Office, the second Belgian shadow government in Katanga. Katanga under Moïse Tshombe and Godefroid Munongo was nothing but a caricature of a state (*un État d'opérette*).[\[4\]](#)

As it is widely known today, Lumumba was assassinated on orders from US president Dwight Eisenhower and the Belgian government, acting mostly through Minister of African Affairs Harold d'Aspremont Lynden and his "advisory" team in Katanga. Both the Americans and the Belgians abandoned their earlier assassination plots, the CIA plan to have cobra venom injected in Lumumba's food or toothpaste, and the Belgian's Barracuda Plan of hiring a European crocodile hunter to shoot Lumumba. The two countries decided to go along with a more practical idea from Lawrence Devlin, then CIA station chief in the Congo, who thought that collaborating with the moderate Congolese leaders who were against Lumumba and associating them to the crime would yield the desired result quickly. With the approval of the US National Security Council, the CIA mounted a Project Wizard by which Congo president Joseph

Kasavubu, military chief Joseph Mobutu, security police chief Victor Nendaka and others took unknown quantities of US dollars to sacrifice the life of their former comrade in the fight for independence.

Other participants in the abduction and the murder of Lumumba, either directly or indirectly include the Tshombe government; the United Nations, whose Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld had "*given de facto protection to the Katanga secession;*"[\[5\]](#) and MI6, the British foreign intelligence service. Baroness Daphne Park, who served as the MI6 officer in Kinshasa between 1959 and 1961, admitted to a fellow House of Lords peer that she had "organized" the British role in the assassination of Lumumba.[\[6\]](#)

Lumumba was captured on December 1 at Lodi, on the left bank of the Sankuru River, and denied UN protection by the Ghanaian contingent under British military officers at Mweka the next morning. Whatever reasons President Nkrumah had for maintaining senior British military officers in top command positions in the Ghanaian army for more than three years after independence, it was a mistake to assume that these officers would be politically neutral in a crisis like the one in the Congo. Major General Henry Alexander, the Chief of Defence Staff of the Ghanaian army was among the top commanders within the UN force whose anti-Lumumba views were well-known, and he did not get along with the Ghanaian ambassador in the Congo. Nkrumah did dismiss all the British officers in September 1961, but the damage was already done.

After Mweka, Lumumba was taken to Ilebo (then Port Francqui) and flown to Kinshasa where, after enduring more humiliation and torture at the Binza parachutist camp in Mobutu's presence, he spent a miserable night in Nendaka's garage. The next day, he was transferred to the élite armored brigade garrison at Mbanza-Ngungu (then Thysville). Even in prison, Lumumba continued to pose a threat to the moderate leadership in Kinshasa, as the Lumumbist government in Kisangani began

expanding its control and authority in the eastern part of the Congo and encouraged Lumumba's followers all over the country to continue the struggle for genuine independence, national unity and territorial integrity. US and Belgian officials were greatly alarmed by these developments, with the US embassy in Kinshasa preoccupied by rumors of a pro-Lumumba coup d'état and the moderate Congolese leaders worrying that the soldiers guarding Lumumba at Mbanza-Ngungu might free him. For Washington and Brussels, the time to get rid of Lumumba physically had arrived. Brussels ordered his transfer to Katanga, where it was certain that he will be killed.

Lumumba and his two companions, youth and sports minister Maurice Mpolo and Senate vice-president Joseph Okito were severely beaten on the plane ride to Katanga, in the presence of two Luba-Kasai members of the college of general commissioners: defense commissioner Ferdinand Kazadi and internal affairs commissioner Jonas Mukamba. Not too far from Luano airport in Lubumbashi (then Elisabethville), Lumumba and his companions were tortured at the Brouwez villa some 8 km from downtown, personally assaulted by Munongo, other Katanga leaders and Belgian officers; and shot by a Belgian execution squad under the command of captain Julien Gat. The next day, police commissioner Gerard Soete and his brother removed the bodies from the burial site, cut them into small pieces and dissolved them in sulfuric acid.

Lessons from the assassination

What are the lessons of the Congo crisis and Lumumba's assassination for the African continent? The Algerian revolutionary, Frantz Fanon, noted two mistakes: Lumumba's request for UN intervention in his attempt to expel Belgian troops from Katanga, and the willingness of African countries to send peacekeeping troops under UN cover. At the time of the first Congo crisis, the UN Secretary General and his chief collaborators shared a common Cold War outlook with Western policymakers and saw their mission in the Congo as that of

preserving the then existing balance of forces in the world.

Even now, after the Cold War, Fanon's words are correct in the assertion that "the UN is the legal card used by the imperialist interests when the card of brute force has failed."[\[7\]](#) The lesson learned here, according to Fanon, is Nkrumah's well-known dictum: *Africa must unite*. Instead of relying on the United Nations and remaining blind in the face of the hidden agendas of the major powers, progressive Africans must rely on their own resources and organizations to meet the challenges of peace and security.

Leadership needed for the African Revolution

That reconstruction and development are yet to take place in much of postcolonial Africa is an indication of the fact that most of our leaders have refused to follow *the revolutionary path* advocated by Fanon by opting for the easier road of enrichment within neocolonial structures.[\[8\]](#) The major consequences of this option include the emergence of an African oligarchy whose main aim is to use state power as a means of personal enrichment; the deepening of underdevelopment in most of our countries; and the impoverishment of the popular masses. Instead of establishing democratic developmental states, we are faced with predatory states and their political economies of plunder.

The first and second generations of African leaders have failed to deliver on the people's expectations of independence. We need new leaders, and these should come from social movements of women, workers and the youth. Such movements ought to be people-centered, and not elite organizations in which ordinary members are simply cheerleaders for ambitious leaders. Their agenda is crystal clear: (1) repair the betrayal of pan-Africanism by pursuing the goal of pan-African unity and solidarity in Africa and the diaspora; (2) transform the structures of the state and the economy in order to meet the people's expectations of

independence, which were and still are freedom and material prosperity; (3) improve the administration of our states to provide more peace and security to our people; and (4) follow the revolutionary path advocated by Fanon to free our continent from neocolonialism and to strengthen ties with Africans in the diaspora.

This blogpost is part of a keynote address made by Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja at the conference, 'Revisiting the 1958 All-African People's Conference – the unfinished business of liberation and transformation' organized by the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon, in collaboration with the Ghana Trades Union Congress (TUC), the Socialist Forum of Ghana, the Third World Network Africa and Lincoln University Pennsylvania (USA), and hosted by the University of Ghana in Accra, December 5-8, 2018.

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Featured Photograph: Patrice Lumumba arrives in New York ([24 July 1960](#)).

Notes

[1] Personal communication from Mohamed Babu, London, September 1987.

[2] Kwame Nkrumah and Gamal Abdul Nasser were among the leaders who befriended Lumumba, with Nkrumah taking an active role in Congo affairs until his overthrow in 1966, and Nasser providing support to Lumumba's followers and having his children grow up in Egypt. As a member of the permanent

committee of the AAPC, Lumumba used the committee's meetings in Conakry to develop a great relationship with President Ahmed Sékou Touré of Guinea, who provided support, including political advisers, to the Congolese leader. With respect to African liberation movements, the leaders he met in Accra included Amilcar Cabral of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), Frantz Fanon of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FNL), and Dr. Félix-Roland Moumié of the Union of the Populations of Cameroon (UPC).

[3] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p. 122.

[4] Ludo De Witte, *L'assassinat de Lumumba* (Paris : Karthala, 2000), p. 83. The English version of this book, *The Assassination of Lumumba* was published by Verso in London in 2001.

[5] Ibid., p. 381. Emphasis added.

[6] Gordon Corera, "MI6 and the Death of Patrice Lumumba," *BBC News*, April 2, 2013; Jean Shaoul, "Britain's Involvement in Assassination of Congo's Lumumba Confirmed," *Africa and the World*, April 28, 2013.

[7] Frantz Fanon, "Lumumba's Death: Could We Do Otherwise?" in Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), p. 195.

[8] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, pp. 97-144.