

HISTORY

Prior to independence

Until the middle of the 19th century the territory drained by the Congo River was practically unknown to Europeans. When Stanley reached the mouth of the Congo in 1877, King Leopold II of the Belgians recognized the immense possibilities of the Congo basin and took the lead in exploring it. Various nations immediately put forward claims by right of earlier exploration, especially Portugal, which based its claim on the discovery of the mouth of the Congo by Portuguese navigators in the 15th century. Other claims and conflicts led to the Berlin Conference in 1884, at which King Leopold II was recognized as the sovereign head of the Congo state. King Leopold II ceded by treaty his Congo Free State to the Government of Belgium on November 28, 1907.

The Congo achieved independence on June 30, 1960, after 85 years of Belgian rule, first as the personal property of the Belgian King (from 1885 to 1908) and then as a Belgian colony. Prior to 1959, when the Belgian Government decided to grant independence to the Congo, the Belgian administration concentrated on economic development and social improvement. The result was the growth of the greatest industrial concentration and the most extensive primary educational system in tropical Africa. A class of skilled and semiskilled workers and office personnel was developed although the vast bulk of the population remained dependent upon subsistence agriculture.

Belgian planning for the enactment of laws which would permit greater participation by the Congolese population in the government of the territory was interrupted by the outbreak of rioting in Léopoldville in January 1959. Following the riots, King Baudouin announced that the Congo could look forward to independence "without undue delay." There was a series of violent political demonstrations in the Congo throughout 1959. In January 1960 the Belgian Government convened a roundtable conference in Brussels in which all the major Congolese political and tribal leaders participated. Under discussion were the terms and timing of independence for the Congo. Congolese politicians pressed for independence now. Under intense pressure the Belgians agreed to grant independence to the Congo on June 30, 1960.

During the election campaign in April 1960 many parties vied for seats in Parliament. Some candidates played on anti-European feelings, and some exploited tribal rivalries. The two strongest parties to emerge were Patrice Lumumba's Mouvement National Congolais—MNC—(National Congolese Movement), which favored a highly centralized, unified Congo state, and Joseph Kasavubu's Alliance des Bakongo—Abako (Alliance of the Bakongo), an ethnic society turned political party which favored a less centralized government. Lumumba and his allies won the largest number of seats, but Kasavubu also emerged in a strong position. After much maneuvering, Kasavubu accepted the office of President while Lumumba became Prime Minister.

Independence

Peaceful independence lasted only 1 week. On July 8 the Force Publique (the Congolese Army) mutinied. Public authority quickly broke down, and Belgian troops intervened on July 10 to protect the lives of Belgian nationals. This action was interpreted as an attempt to reimpose Belgian authority, and it provoked even greater violence against Europeans. On July 11 President Moïse Tshombe of Katanga proclaimed that Province an independent country, and on the same day the Congo Central Government requested United Nations assistance in restoring order and protecting the integrity of the Congo.

The U.N. mission in the Congo was to assist the national security forces in maintaining order, protect the integrity of the Congo, and provide technical assistance where needed. When the U.N. refused to place itself at the disposition of the Central Government, relations between the Lumumba government and the U.N. deteriorated and Lumumba requested and received direct Soviet aid.

As a consequence of Lumumba's unwillingness to cooperate with the U.N. and his unilateral dealings with the Soviets, he was dismissed as Prime Minister on September 5, 1960, by President Kasavubu, in accordance with terms of the Fundamental Law. Lumumba refused to accept dismissal and attempted in his turn to dismiss Kasavubu, contending that the President's action was vitiated since it had not been approved by Parliament.

A military coup d'état followed, led by Colonel Joseph Mobutu, who declared all politicians "neutralized," suspended Parliament, and announced the formation of a government of "Commissioners" composed of a number of the Congo's few