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Republic of Congo

Constitutional gerrymandering and murderous consolidation of capitalist nepotism

- Features -

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From Angola to Chad, Central Africa, including Equatorial Guinea, is the sub-region most affected by the decline in oil prices, because it is dependent on oil revenues. An oligarchic resistance to the respect of the rules of the democratic game, in the form of a new type of authoritarian regime combining a formal multiparty regime with a repressive confiscation of power, characterized by nepotism, is closely related to this rentier character.

Thus, in a direction contrary to the wind that blew from North Africa in 2010-2011, sweeping away in 2014 the Blaise Compaoré regime in Burkina Faso, in 2016, the Congolese, Chadian and Gabonese peoples were forced to suffer, for another term of office, disgraced regimes. The people of the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), confronted with the postponement of the elections, which extended the presidency of Kabila, have already seen dozens of people killed following the repression of popular demonstrations. So we could speak of a "spirit of sub-region". Without forgetting that in CÃ´te d'Ivoire Ouattara has had a constitution drafted that allows the president to appoint one third of the members of the Senate.

In the Republic of Congo (also called "Congo Brazzaville"), this "spirit" was manifested in 2015 by a change of constitution without a shadow of popular approval, followed in 2016 by a grotesque presidential election; following which the regime seems to be seeking legitimacy by the murderous repression of the population in the Pool region, close to the capital, Brazzaville. This is taking place in a social context characterized by particularly indecent levels of inequality and a future that looks far worse, in the event that a democratic and popular alternative is not built.

Constitutional gerrymandering in 2015

The constitutional gerrymandering for the non-limitation of presidential terms of office has been condemned by the African Union and public opinion: this did not prevent the regime of Brazzaville from initiating such a process. The overthrow of Blaise Compaoré had, on the one hand given hope and energy to a large majority of the Congolese people, but on the other hand, it haunted the days and the nights of those who feared suffering the same fate. Following the example of the violent and murderous repression carried out by the Burundian head of state, Pierre Nkurunziza, the Congolese president, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, chose to change the constitution so as to move via a referendum to "another republic", because Article 185 of the constitution adopted in 2002 on the initiative of Sassou-Nguesso himself stipulated that the number of terms of office of the President of the Republic could not be revised.

The organization of this referendum was contested by a majority of the population who, in the two main cities, responded massively, from August 2015, to calls to demonstrate by the main platform of the opposition, IDC-FROCAD (Initiative for Democracy in the Congo and Republican Front for the respect of the constitutional order and democratic alternation). The repression was deadly in Pointe-Noire (the oil and economic capital) and Brazzaville. This, of course, was not the case for the counter-demonstration organized in Brazzaville by the regime in favour of the referendum and the "Yes" vote.

CFA franc [\[1\]](#) banknotes served as a mobilizing factor, but fearing nevertheless that they might mobilize fewer people than the opposition, the regime seems even to have imported participants from Kinshasa...

Despite the low level of participation, clear to any observer – the boycott launched by the opposition platform was

strongly supported and reinforced by the preventive migration of many families away from their homes for fear of reprisals, since the regime had quite openly deployed the army and militia forces – the government nevertheless announced quite incredible levels of participation (72 per cent) and therefore approval (92.9 per cent), recalling the time of the one-party state. But the effectiveness of the call for a boycott had not been noted either by Radio France International or by the representative of the French state, who was sticking to the blank cheque given by François Hollande to his colleague in Brazzaville. The position of firmness against constitutional gerrymandering displayed by the French president on the occasion of the great Françafrique [2] assemblies held in Kinshasa, then in Dakar, was thus ridiculed by Hollande himself.

In October 2015, the Congo thus found itself with a new constitution, not recognized by a large majority of the population and the main platform of the opposition. The road was thus open for the next stage: the re-election of the sitting president, in spite of his thirty years of cumulative power (the one-party state, the period after military victory, the multiparty system), his advanced age [3] and a record that was so negative for the vast majority of the population that, during his investiture speech, he promised a policy of... breaking with the past: "Starting today, let us create a break with the deviant mentalities and the perverse kinds behaviour of the past: laziness, laxity, irresponsibility, lack of conscientiousness, corruption, fraud, extortion, ethnocentrism or the community instinct, nepotism and the tendency to be wasteful. Starting today, let us all return to the spirit of hard work, rigour, discipline, responsibility, probity, national unity, respect for public affairs and love of the homeland. At the beginning of the next school year, these values, which come from republican ethics, will be taught in all the schools of the Republic. "

"Mr. 8 per cent" president

Planned for July 2016, the presidential election was brought forward to March. Caught short, the opposition candidates did not have the opportunity to prepare, to discuss presenting a single candidate or to collect the 25 million CFA francs (50 months' salary of a civilian civil servant of category A1 at the end of their career) required by the electoral code. This ruse of the government was disrupted in February 2016 by the candidacy of a military personality, General Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko, who had just resigned from his position as an adviser to the sitting president and as special representative of the President of the African Union in the Central African Republic. The regime tried to intimidate Mokoko, including by physical assault, in the middle of the day, in front of witnesses, at Brazzaville airport, on his return from Bangui. This was all the more the case because his candidacy had been demanded by some participants in the great demonstration of the opposition in Pointe-Noire and because he seemed to be above the ethnic or regional clientelism that is a major characteristic of almost all the political parties. This almost unexpected candidate had to his credit to have, as Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, ensured the peaceful conduct of the National Sovereign Conference in 1991, having then relieved of most of his prerogatives the then head of state, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, who had been in power for twelve years ...) and established the principles of "democratization" in the Congo [4].

The camp of his former employer did not dare legally to prevent his candidacy. The real popular mobilization in his favour, beyond ethnic or regional affiliations, and even partisan considerations (the idea of a useful vote for this candidate without a political party was making its way in the electorate) seems to have dissuaded the government.

In fact, since the Independent National Electoral Commission (Newspeak) was under control and the electoral rolls had not really been verified, there was no real obstacle to the proclamation of fraudulent results, despite the establishment, by the five opposition candidates of the IDC-FROCAD and Mokoko, united as the Opposition Charter for Victory, of a Technical Electoral Commission, responsible for the parallel collection of the voting figures by their representatives in all the polling stations. To counter this, the Ministry of the Interior ordered the telecommunications companies to interrupt their networks on March 20, the day of the presidential election and the following day, to avoid the circulation of results from the polling stations. This interruption was prolonged well beyond the two days in the

ministerial note, disrupting social relations that had become dependent on new technologies and cutting the Congo off from the rest of the world. At the time of the referendum, access to the Internet had already been disrupted for a long time.

The Chadian General-President Idris Itno Déby, candidate to succeed himself, drew inspiration from this example a few weeks later.

Despite the intimidation, physical assaults and arbitrary arrests, the results finally arrived at the headquarters of the Technical Electoral Commission and the pavement-radio took responsibility for making the contents known. When the official commission announced on March 25, at 2.30 am, the outgoing president's victory in the first round, with 60 per cent of the vote (and a turnout of 64 per cent), the news of his defeat in the three main cities, which represent more than half of the electorate, was already an open secret. This defeat was moreover – clumsily – recognized by the general secretary of the ruling party.

To the 60 per cent of the Ministry of the Interior, the opposition finally, after laboriously collecting all the figures, countered with 8 per cent – in fourth position, which would not allow the outgoing president to take part in the second round.

So, in order to avoid any challenge to the results, Sassou Nguesso, now known as "Mr. 8 per cent", had created an atmosphere of fear. The rumour spread that there would be a campaign of violence by his paramilitaries (who had been confined to their barracks for well over a year) in the neighbourhoods of Brazzaville considered to have been won by the opposition, and the inhabitants fled once again. On March 29, the IDC-FROCAD's "dead-country" operation in protest at the official results met with some success, especially in Pointe-Noire. That seemed to indicate that there would be large-scale mobilizations in the event of validation of these results by the Constitutional Court.

Unleashing of violence

On the night of April 3-4, Brazzaville neighbourhoods supposedly won by the opposition were invaded by armed people. Some public buildings, including police stations, were burned down. It was in this atmosphere that the Constitutional Court validated the official results early in the evening of April 4. Popular wisdom considered the announcement of this validation as the reason for the armed attack, which the opposition denounced as a masquerade by the government, creating a climate of terror that made it impossible to mobilize.

These armed people allegedly belonged to a militia linked to the opposition: the "nsilulu" (called "ninjas" through confusion) of the former warlord Frédéric Bitsamou, alias Pastor Ntumi [5], who is also the leader of a neo-evangelical sect. But part of the public pointed to another militia, led by a pro-government parliamentarian who had publicly threatened reprisals against the opposition, accusing it of preparing post-election troubles. As for Pastor Ntumi, he openly accused the authorities of having armed, in addition to the parliamentarian's militia, some former "ninjas" (militia of the Congolese Movement for Democracy and Unequal Development - MCDDI of Bernard Kolélas, father of the former minister and presidential candidate, Brice Parfait Kolélas). His remarks were not lacking in credibility, since he himself was considered by some observers to have been set up by the authorities to trigger a "rebellion" in the Pool region in 1998 [6].

With the rebellion of 1998, the Pool, reputed to be focused on political messianism, received a new messiah in the person of Pastor Ntumi, replacing Bernard Kolélas, exiled along with Lissouba after the military victory of Nguesso in 1997. The exactions of his "nsilulu" on the population, having fled Bacongo and Makéléélé as well as some villages in the Pool, were attributed to Kolélas's "ninjas" in order to weaken his influence in his electoral stronghold. The "nsilulu" war against the Cobra militia and the Sassou-Nguesso national army was in fact a masquerade – but a

murderous masquerade with real victims, concomitant with the war waged by Sassou-Nguesso's army against the residues of the Lissouba militia that had retreated to the Niari region. This episode of the Congolese "civil war" ended with the peace signed in 2003 and the attribution to Ntumi of the position of Delegate-General.

So Ntumi knows what he is talking about when he speak of a masquerade concerning the militia violence of April 2014, in which he denies all involvement, but which has transformed him from the status of Delegate-General to the presidency to that of terrorist, [7], tracked both by attack helicopters and by troops on the ground, including mercenaries. Once again, it is the peaceful pauperized population of the Pool that is the main victim of a murderous masquerade.

This operation was denounced by Bishop Louis Portella Mbulu, supported by a few voices from "civil society" and the IDC-FROCAD (including that of Brice Parfait Kolélas, deputy for Kinkala in the Pool) strongly relayed in the diaspora. This finally made possible limited access to humanitarian aid in some of the disaster areas. The appeal for a protest march on April 15 in Brazzaville, launched by the former minister and former candidate Claudine Munari (former director of the cabinet of Pascal Lissouba), was countered by the government, which placed her under house arrest, encircled by the police for weeks. It was the same with the other candidate, General Mokoko, who, despite the pressure – including the involvement of Françafrique diplomacy – refused to recognize the "victory" of the General-President in office and called for the bombing of the Pool to stop. As for Ntumi, protesting against the accusation concerning violence on April 4, accompanied by the bombardment of the village that served as a political-evangelical fief for him, he asked for a UN investigation into the violence and the opening of a dialogue under the umbrella of the "international community", which was rejected by the regime which was rather determined to end militarily with that what it now considered to be just a "terrorist." This drove the "nsilulu" to opt, in the name of self-defence, for armed reaction to the extortion carried out against the population by the soldiers.

Since then, the Pool has remained a zone of military intervention [8]. Could this suffering imposed on the population of the Pool be explained by the fact that Sassou-Nguesso was not among the first three candidates there, according to the results of the presidential election given by the Technical Electoral Commission? Or would it rather correspond to the need to eliminate an ex-accomplice in the criminal masquerade of 1998-2002, now that the question of taking the case to the International Criminal Court (ICC) has increasingly been raised? Some people even speak of one more masquerade with the nsilulu. Other, older, closets may also be (re) opened, even though, according to Article 96 of the new Constitution, "no prosecution for acts classified as a crime or misdemeanour or for serious dereliction of duty in the exercise of his functions may any longer be initiated against the President of the Republic after he leaves office" and that "the violation of the above provisions constitutes a crime of misuse of authority or of high treason in accordance with the law".

A former collaborator of the regime, the lawyer Massengo Tiassé, managed to leave the country incognito and to file at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva a report considered as providing overwhelming evidence concerning the exactions committed in the Pool from April 4 onwards, and other arbitrary arrests. Confronted with the persistence of the protests that he cannot stop himself repressing, Nkurunziza recently decided to organize a vote for the withdrawal of Burundi from the ICC. At the beginning of November, young supporters of the President, accompanied by the Minister of Youth, demonstrated for the withdrawal of the Congo from the ICC. Could the fight against the "terrorists" (Ntumi and his nsilulu followers), the forcible displacement of populations in the Pool be explained by the presence of coltan [9] in the areas undergoing bombardments in order to drive out the population [10]? This information is based on only one source, even though the insatiable hunger for capitalist accumulation demonstrated by the ruling family and its clientele makes it plausible.

Pauperisation, nepotism, clientelism

In this country, which ranks fourth among oil producers in sub-Saharan Africa and has a population of less than five million, at least 50 per cent of the population is now considered to be living below the poverty line [11]. Youth unemployment is around 60 per cent. The classes in state schools frequently have more than 150 pupils, in some cases sitting on the ground or in cramped rooms – one of the factors leading to children dropping out of school on a massive scale. The situation is obviously worse for girls, especially in rural areas, where moreover the teacher shortage in many cases leads parents to use the services of some of those excluded from the education system to serve as teachers.

For certain middle-class families who manage to escape pauperization, there are private schools, most of them of questionable quality and mainly employing teachers working in state schools, preoccupied with making ends meet but ending up with an overload of work, to the detriment of the pupils. Despite the ongoing building of general hospitals in all regions (which seems to be motivated by the allocation of building contracts to the clan in power) [12], public health centres, starting with the University Hospital Centre in Brazzaville, are in a wretched state, without elementary medicines for patients, in a state of insalubrity and under-equipped.

In rural areas, women give birth dreadful conditions. Health workers seem to have been (badly) trained once and for all, without any provision for continuous education. Admittedly, there is an abundance of private health centres, but the conditions are so bad that the new Minister of Health seems to want to put them in some kind of order, without having any plan to replace them. There are some private medical practices for the upper middle classes, which also look after minor problems of the leaders, whose medical consultations generally take place in Morocco, South Africa, Europe and even in the United States. From now on, they will also be able to visit the president's village, which is increasingly equipped with infrastructure that has nothing to do with the local peasantry. A state-of-the-art clinic has just been opened there, with in particular doctors imported from Cuba.

This is a social situation that the self-re-elected president should not boast about, despite what oil production brought in before the recent decline in oil prices. It is partly the result of the large external public debt of the Congo, which, as a highly indebted poor country, benefited from a reduction of \$1.9 billion in 2010, after having proved that it met the criteria of the Bretton Woods institutions. Five years later, the IMF ranked the Congo as a "moderate risk of over-indebtedness", ranking first among African states with a rapid increase in external public debt (32 per cent of GDP in 2013, 48.5 per cent in 2015). Its borrowings on the financial markets have recently led to a downgrading of its status by the rating agencies, due to delay in making the interest payments on time. But the deadline was quickly met, whereas scholarship students had been waiting for months for the payment of their grants, the employees of the CHU had still not received salaries, nor pensioners the payment of their pension, and local government employees all over the country had been on strike for months, demanding their unpaid wages... The latest news is that to meet the requirements of the IMF [13], as well as the reimbursement of internal creditors (banks, contractors, etc.) the state will raise 229 million euros on the sub-regional bond market (CEMAC), whose reimbursement will only worsen the social situation of the people in the short term.

Meanwhile, not by accident, the capitalist activism of the ruling family and its clientelist network – including among the "creditors" – is intensifying the exploitation of oil reserves [14] and using the proceeds for the restoration of "luxury". It is also involved in banking investment, private security and the building and civil engineering industries. This frenzied activity explains a certain "protectionism" at the local level and a laxity in the adaptation to the neo-liberal regulation that is constantly deplored by *Doing Business*, the pernicious tool of the IMF, which nonetheless serves as a positive reference for many Congolese oppositionists.

It is not from the Congolese opposition that we can expect criticism of the policies dictated by the Bretton Woods institutions. It just expects them to take a severe attitude towards the ruling faction, which it considers to be incompetent. The situation is much worse today than during the National Sovereign Conference, or even during the transition, during which some criticisms of the policy of neoliberal structural adjustment were made.

This capitalist activism is illustrated by representatives of the governing faction being mentioned in various "affairs" on the international scene (Gunvor in Switzerland, Rota do Atlantico in Portugal – along with Asperbras, BAIC in Benin, Panama Papers, etc.), far beyond the so-called "ill-gained goods" affair, whose treatment in France seems to come down to the balance of power between the magistrates and the Françafrique metropolitan networks. Moreover, since 2012, Brazzaville has been the venue of the annual celebration of the growth of African capitalism, with the conference organized by *Forbes Africa* (under the patronage of the head of state, of course); the French edition of the eponymous magazine has its headquarters in Brazzaville.

It is this family monopolization of the local economic space, arising from the seizure of the national treasury, which explains the transition to the opposition of some of the former allies of Sassou-Nguesso against the regime of Pascal Lissouba, who were disappointed at not having obtained a share of the privileges proportionate to their investment in the victory of 1997 and to its consolidation. Relations of consanguinity and of an ethnic and regional character, new alliances considered to be more efficient having overcome the old ones (often formed by complicity in crime), despite, sometimes, a Masonic fraternity (about which there is a proliferation of mystifying discourses). As the US Embassy expressed it, on the eve of the 2009 presidential election: "The main figures of the opposition are not very different from Sassou himself. They are of the same generation, were active in the Congolese Labour Party (PCT) when the Congo was a one-party state, they are all Masons. (...) None of them has a vision of the future of the Congo different from that of Sassou. The upper echelons of government are filled with people who have little technical competence and who are more interested in accompanying the president on his travels – and in collecting their daily payments – than in managing their ministries. " [15]. Admittedly, 2016 is not 2009: the personnel has changed relatively, but the spirit has remained the same. At the same time, in the president's circle, there is a running battle between clientelist networks in which the (extended) family network has finally become central, and that includes the children – considering the very numerous progeny of Sassou-Nguesso – who do not limit their ambitions, even though some of them were held back in 2015-2016, concerning the proposed dynastic succession.

A self-limited opposition

It is mainly against this nepotism that opposition is formed. Because there is a consensus about neoliberalism, despite the proclaimed concern about the poverty of the population, more by demagogy than by naivety. The essential thing is to come to power, after having already participated in it without undertaking anything at all that would express any concern for the welfare of the subaltern layers – wage-earners, unemployed youth and other poor people, including their own ethnic groups or regions (departments). It is in fact on the same criteria as the Bretton Woods institutions and assimilated to them that this opposition – inside the country as well as among the diaspora – evaluates the state of the Congolese economy, using the neoliberal expression of "good governance".

In fact, that does not refer to running the country for the common or public good, according to the principle of permanent extension of social justice, but to governing in accordance with the principles of neoliberalism, transparency with regard to the institutions of Bretton Woods, an effective multiparty system, with alternating fractions of the same (capitalist) class project. So the government was able to react to criticisms of the opposition about its incompetence by arguing in defence of its rate of growth, considered by the international financial institutions, before the fall in the price of oil, as one of the best in Africa. The opposition, which no doubt considers itself more competent to manage neo-liberalization in a dominated state, confined itself to pointing out that this growth does not benefit everyone, rather than criticizing this criterion of appreciation and the ideology, which it shares.

In the struggle waged by this opposition since the return to power of Sassou-Nguesso, although sometimes occasional support has been expressed to a public-sector teachers' trade union that was on strike and being repressed, or to former employees of the National Post Office and Telecommunications who have fought for years for the payment of the money due to them, the need for a trade union movement in the struggle for democracy and

social progress is not even formulated. And, for good reason: these oppositionists would not want one, if they were in power. They are also real or potential capitalists.

However, if the National Sovereign Conference was convened in 1991, it was also thanks to the Congolese Trade Union Confederation which had broken away from the one-party state and mobilized. Further back, the first postcolonial and kleptocratic Congolese regime, that of Fulbert Youlou (a satrap of De Gaulle, Foccart and HouphouËt-Boigny) was overthrown in 1963 by a popular insurrection led by a coalition of trade union confederations.

The two existing Congolese trade union confederations (the CSC and the CSTC), due to their links with the government, with which they confirmed, in 2010, a consensus on the policy of the Bretton Woods institutions (quite undisturbed by the increase by 12 per cent of the wage index for civil servants in 2012) remained outside the mobilization against the referendum and the contestation of the results of the presidential election. That is one of the factors that explains the failure of the dynamic against constitutional gerrymandering.

Unlike in the Congo, the fall of Blaise Compaoré in Burkina Faso was possible due to the involvement of certain currents of the trade union movement and the existence of a social movement, rich in its diversity, whose accumulation of forces dates back to the mobilization in the aftermath of the assassination in December 1998 of the journalist Norbert Zongo [16]. This movement against impunity had also been able to integrate the criticism of neoliberal structural adjustment, with its social effects harmful to the working classes.

Such a dynamic is non-existent in Congo. The few Congolese rappers who took an interest in mobilizing against constitutional gerrymandering, such as the *2Mondes* group, had not previously carried out real work on the ground among the poorest social layers. This is in contrast to *Y'en a marre* in Senegal or the *Balai citoyen* in Burkina Faso. In these countries there are still radical left-wing traditions and sectors of civil society, including trade unions, involved in the dynamics of the global justice movement. In Congo there was no local global justice dynamic (other than two organizations that identified with the international movement). There was also no movement of self-organization in poor neighborhoods. The trauma left by the violence of 1993-1997 and 1998-2002, the government's arsenal of repression and the nature of the Congolese political parties (pro-capitalist, clientelist, ethnic/regional, with too great a deficiency in internal democracy) did not favour the emergence of such a dynamic.

Change through the ballot box having failed, the opposition came up with a call for a post-electoral "inclusive dialogue", and even a States-General of the Nation with the faction that has been able to remain in power by trampling underfoot the agreements established during the "dialogues" that had been organized since 2011. Would this faction have done all that to finally accept "a period of recomposition, with a transitional government that would govern the country until the organization of new elections, clear and transparent", whereas nothing in the balance of forces obliges it to do so? Because this opposition has broken the momentum of the peaceful popular mobilization. Some of its leaders, who have ethnic/regional electoral clienteles, seem to want to avoid being crushed by the vote-fixing machine during the legislative elections. The opposition is still waiting for support from the "international community", considered to be concerned about the respect of democratic rules in Africa, even though its positions, marked by variable geometry, are mostly gesticulations that give rise to trips, media exhibitions and travel expenses for its emissaries.

France, tutelary power

When it comes down to it, in the Françafrique zone, it is in principle the position of France, the tutelary power (which has, for example, involved the UN in Mali and the Central African Republic) that prevails. Now, after a few

spectacular sallies against constitutional gerrymandering, to which the exfiltration of Compaore by the French army in October 2014 gave an air of presidential determination, Francois Hollande quickly returned to the Françafrique dimension by approving, in a roundabout way, the legitimacy of the constitutional referendum. Through the appointment of a new ambassador to Brazzaville, he eventually acknowledged the official results, after having dragged his feet to the rhythm of disagreements within the PS, and even within the European Union [17].

Between the official proclamation of the results in Brazzaville and the resumption of the normal course of relations between the two countries, there was even the reception at the Élysée Palace of the Congolese-French writer Alain Mabanckou, who had become one of the spokespersons abroad of those who contested the imposture. Was it out of naïveté or in order to obtain greater coverage of the Congolese situation by the international media, including the bombing attacks in the Pool, that this French citizen of Congolese origin, who occupied in 2015-2016 the Chair of Artistic Creation at the Collège de France, requested this meeting? Did he think that he could provide the French head of state with more information on the Congolese situation? Was it a surprise to him to realize at the end of his meeting that at the highest levels of the French Republic economic interests prevailed over the respect for democratic rules? France still remembers that it is the Congo's number one partner, since it is its first customer and second economic partner (after Cameroon) in Central Africa, the fifth largest importer of French goods in sub-Saharan Africa, with the third positive balance of trade for France in sub-Saharan Africa (after Senegal, second, and South Africa, first). This is not to be sneezed at in these times of neoliberal competition for African markets.

All the more so as, according to the information available to the General Directorate of the French Treasury in June 2016, between 2012 and 2015 France went from being the first to the third largest supplier of Congo, while China has moved from the second to the first place. On the occasion of the post-electoral visit of Sassou-Nguesso to China, the Congo became a "pilot country" of Chinese cooperation in Africa, with also a project of convertibility of the CFA franc into renminbi, through the intermediary of the Sino-Congolese Bank for Africa, in operation since July 2016 in Brazzaville. Faced with this thrust by China, François Hollande, whose readiness to oblige French capital was beyond doubt, could not compromise its interests. Moreover, at the moment when Mabanckou was received at the Élysée, the visit of a delegation of the Medef (the French employers' organization) to the Congo was in preparation. Because Francois Hollande wants to reconquer the ground lost in the traditional backyard of France, and beyond [18]

Like almost the entire Congolese opposition in the Françafrique metropolis, Mabanckou remains a prisoner of the official political framework.

Consequently, Françafrique is considered as a deviation and not as one of the constituent elements of the French Republic, which is a capitalist power. That is why hopes were placed at the time in the coming to power of François Mitterrand, former Minister of the Interior of colonial France, who contributed, by relying on Houphouët-Boigny, to the rightward evolution of the African Democratic Rally. These hopes were quickly disappointed but they were reborn with the election of François Hollande, whose attitude has led many Congolese in the Françafrique metropolis towards sympathy for... the National Front, something that is deplored by Alain Mabanckou [19]. The party of Marine Le Pen has been prominent in supporting the Congolese mobilization against the constitutional gerrymandering – not out of some attachment to democracy, but because of its links with Brice Parfait Kolélas. Both those who deluded themselves about Hollande and those who swung towards the FN have proved the persistence of the colonial nature of political consciousness among the Congolese-French and the non-existence of a link between alternation and alternative .

Alternation is not enough

The struggle for alternation is legitimate and necessary, especially with the threat of dynastic succession. It can be a school of political education for those who honestly follow today's parties and their leaders. Questions are already

being raised about the real political motivations of these leaders, who opposed the constitutional referendum, did not recognize the constitution that was promulgated, but nevertheless were candidates for the presidential election. These leaders who did not seize on the results of the Technical Electoral Commission to fulfill the promise of a post-electoral national paralysis, but instead contradicted themselves and opposed each other, whereas it could be seen that people were waiting expectantly during the first weeks after the announcement of the results.

While party leaders on the main opposition platform (including one presidential candidate) are incarcerated, and military operations continue in the Pool, some parties are already announcing their preparations for the parliamentary elections. One grouping of opposition parties presents the spectacle of an internal putsch; another party leader seems preoccupied about the position of leader of the opposition... Would this be based on the results of the presidential election? How many parliamentarians will be elected? In public opinion, there is even talk of the appointment of elected representatives by the Presidency of the Republic, which remains the master of "electoral governance".

Being a parliamentarian gives access to a good salary, even though it does not equal that of the ministers (between 5 and 10 million francs CFA per month, which is 55 times to 111 times the official minimum wage in the civil service) or of some general managers. That makes it possible to live at a level far above that of the people and to be, or to have the perspective of becoming, a capitalist – considered as the unique socio-political ideal – with the possibility of occasionally throwing a few crumbs to their electorate, with a view to forthcoming elections. Thus, parliamentarians of the opposition as well as of the ruling faction contribute to the exponential spread of venality in Congolese society. The struggle for alternation can only allow the replacement of one faction by another faction more or less concerned with "good governance". So in order not to be limited to a change of the personnel presiding over poverty, the misery and the oppression of the popular classes, we must fight for an alternative.

If at present popular consciousness is produced by the cocktail of neo-liberalization and a strong dose of ethnic/regionalism, the results of the candidate Mokoko (who comes from the north of the country) in the South (coming in first in Kouilou, second in Pointe-Noire, second in Pool and second in Brazzaville ahead of Sassou-Nguesso) also show a certain flexibility of ethnic electoral preferences in the population, a sort of nationalist political consciousness, even by default. With a political project constructed in a dynamic including the people's self-organization on the basis of an alternative social and political project, the consciousness of ethnic/regional attachment could exist without turning into ethnicism or regionalism. On the contrary, a criticism of the regime that puts forward the ethnic/regional origin of Sassou-Nguesso participates in its reinforcement by naturalizing ethnicism and avoiding analysing the behaviour of political actors in terms of their social situations and their ambitions. It is impossible not to take into account the social disparities that cut across all ethnicities/regions (departments), nor the identity of interests – a factor of competition and conflictual relations – within the political class, over and above the instrumentalisation of ethnic or regional affiliation by each of its factions. This identity of the interests of the political class should not be put in parentheses, even in the case of a tactical alliance for alternation. An alliance is not the effacement of differences. Criticism of the present governing faction should be conducted not only by criticizing nepotism or regionalism but by criticizing the neoliberal socio-economic project of the regime. It is this project that explains the instrumentalisation of ethnicity and the refusal of democracy.

The Congo is at present lacking an alternative political current, producing a political culture inspired by the lessons of the "Self-criticism of the M22" [\[20\]](#) of the failure of the forces of change at the end of the National Sovereign Conference and of the subsequent re-regimentation of the trade union movement. The existence of this alternative current will also depend on the existence of a social movement, of self-organization of the exploited and oppressed popular classes, of women and youth. Let us hasten to build them slowly.

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[1] A currency used by many countries in French-speaking Africa, which facilitates relations of a neo-colonial type between France and its former colonies, which is pegged to the euro, via the French Treasury)

[2] "Françafrique" is the name given to the system of domination – economic, political and not infrequently through military interventions – by France over its former African colonies

[3] It seems that Sassou-Nguesso did not succeed in getting some of his followers and the leadership of his party to accept the candidacy of one of his sons.

[4] The alleged involvement of General Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko in an attempted military coup against the post-National Sovereign Conference transition government(1991-1992) was already forgotten.

[5] Pastor Ntumi (meaning "one who has been sent", the implication being that it was God himself who sent him) was, until his dismissal on April 6, 2016, in charge of the General Delegation responsible for promoting the values of peace and security and for repairing the after-effects of war, attached to the office of the President of the Republic.

[6] This rebellion served as a pretext for heavy repression of the population, from the districts of Bacongo and Makélékélé in Brazzaville to the Pool, the electoral fief of the MCDDI of Bernard Kolélas, considered as a renegade by Sassou-Nguesso. After providing his militiamen in 1993 as forces to back up the alliance between Sassou-Nguesso's PCT (Congolese Labour Party) and Françafrique (irritated by the increased Congolese share in the dividing up of oil revenues with Elf) against President Pascal Lissouba, after the first "free and transparent" elections that followed the 1991 National Sovereign Conference, Bernard Kolélas (who came second in the first round of the elections, after Lissouba but ahead of Sassou-Nguesso) found himself in 1997 Lissouba's Prime Minister. Sassou-Nguesso launched a "civil war" in June 1997 with the support of French President Jacques Chirac and Angola, a war that he had won by October of that year.

[7] On the last day of the presidential election campaign, his escort, returning to his stronghold in the Pool was attacked by the national police as it left Brazzaville and one of his guards was killed. The Delegate General, who had made the mistake of appearing at the campaign meeting of candidate Brice Parfait Kolelas, whose campaign team he had joined, and of publicly supporting the candidates of the Opposition Charter for Victory.

[8] In response to questions put to the government during a session of the National Assembly by the deputy Brice Parfait Kolélas (who had resumed his place, waiting for the next legislative elections), Prime Minister Clement Mouamba denied the existence of bombings in the Pool. But a statement, published at the same time by one of the opposition party collectives (led by some who had been his political friend until recently), spoke of the extension of the bombing beyond the Department of Pool and of a helicopter that had been shot down with its East European occupants. This collective seems not to have excluded the implication of Ntumi in this tragic masquerade.

[9] Coltan, from columbite-tantalite, is a metallic ore from which the elements niobium and tantalite are extracted

[10] This is suggested in an article published on October 4, 2016 by an oppositionist belonging to the Congolese diaspora, Bishikanda-dia-Pool, on a blog of *mediapart.fr*: "[Sassou vide le Pool de ses habitants for €Coltan](#)"

[11] See Alain Mizellé, "Pourquoi les cessions d'interêts d'ENI and de Total E & P aux pilleurs du régime Sassou-Nguesso constituent des crimes économiques." (<http://congo-liberty.com/?p=13093>)

[12] With the situation in the Pool, trains can no longer reach Brazzaville, which depends largely on goods coming from the port city of Pointe-Noire, foodstuffs that are produced in the departments of the South, including the Pool. This creates shortages and an increase in the prices of basic necessities that have to be transported by road – avoiding the Pool - or even imported from Kinshasa. It is obviously the poor who suffer as a result.

[13] See, for example, Marc Guéniat, "Palace À Venise et villa in Portugal: il fait bon être ministre des finances À Brazzaville", *Le Monde*, December 2, 2016 (or <http://www.journaldebrazza.com/article.Php?aid=8747>)

[14] IMF, Press Release No. 16/493, "[Les services du FMI achèvent leur mission de 2016 au titre de l'article IV en République du Congo](#)".
[November 8, 2016](#).

[15] Confidential Cable of the United States Ambassador to Brazzaville, Alan Eastham, July 1, 2009: "[Congo-B/EU: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION NOT A PRIORITY FOR BRUSSELS](#)".

The diplomat reported on the reasons, explained by the Portuguese Ambassador, Miguel Amado, for not sending observers to the forthcoming presidential election: "Even more important," he said, "Brussels does not believe that conditions in Congo-Brazzaville are conducive to the holding of free and fair elections".

[16] See the interview with Lila Chouli, "Social movements and the fall of Compaoré", January 11, 2015:
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3799>

[17] In the cable of the US Embassy quoted above it is also stated: "Amado said that the Embassy of France has a more accommodating point of view regarding the Congolese than the EU and that the commitment of the EU with Brazzaville is separate from the bilateral relations of France with the Congo, although on occasion they overlap ". In 2015-2016, the ambassador of the European Union delegation to the Congo, Saskia de Lang, did not hide her disapproving opinion on the referendum and the presidential election. The Congolese authorities finally asked for her recall by Brussels. But they did not obtain it.

[18] See Hubert Védrine, Lionel Zinsou, Tidjane Thiam, Jean-Michel Severino, Hakim El Karoui, "un partenariat pour l'avenir: 15 propositions pour une nouvelle dynamique entre l'Afrique et la France", Ministry of the Economy and Finance (France), December 2013. See the critical analysis made by Jean Batou, "The redeployment of French imperialism in Africa and the humanitarian daze of the left":
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3597>

[19] Alain Mabanckou speaks of "a nationalist party that has interfered in the Congolese debate. Moreover, I was distressed to note that some of my compatriots espoused these last-minute populist narratives of a party that was rather characterised by a wave of colonial nostalgia ", Alain Mabanckou (interviewed by Valérie Marin La Meslée), "[This Election has been smitten with smallpox](#)," *Le Point*, March 25, 2016

[20] The M22 or February 22 Movement came from a left wing of the PCT, around Ange Diawara and Jean-Baptiste Ikoko, which took its distance from President Marien Ngouabi, sharply criticizing the bourgeoisification, corruption and nepotism of his current, decried as a militaro-tribalist bureaucratic oligarchy (*obumitri*) subject to imperialism, to which the present Congolese president belonged. After the failure of an attempted coup on February 22, 1972, followed by massive repression, Diawara, Ikoko and the other survivors (who came from all the regions of the country), inspired by Che Guevara, organized a "revolutionary focus" in the area around Goma Tsé-tsé, a few tens of kilometres from Brazzaville, in the Pool. Forced to retreat to Zaire and arrested by Mobutu's forces, they were handed over by him to Ngouabi in exchange for Zairian opponents (who were immediately executed). The M22 leaders were assassinated and their mutilated bodies were exhibited at the Stade de la Révolution in Brazzaville on April 24, 1973.

Before their assassination, Ange Diawara, Jean-Baptiste Ikoko, Jean-Claude Bakekolo and Jean-Pierre Olouka wrote a book, *Autocritique du M22 – Le mouvement révolutionnaire du 22 février, 1972 in Congo-Brazzaville, which for a long time circulated clandestinely in the Congo and was finally published by l'Harmattan in 2012. See also the testimony of Pierre Eboundit (interviews with Henda Diogenes Senny), "Le M22. Une expérience au Congo. Devoir de mémoire", Paris, éditions Ccinia communication, 2009.*