

The rebirth of African "heart of darkness"

Congo, illusion and hope

The first free elections since independence are not enough to close a scandalous past: the looting of the immense resources of the country must end. Now the expectations of Congolese' peace and justice can not be ignored

(published in the monthly newsmagazine "Galatea", February 2007)

"If Africa was portrayed as a gun, its trigger would be in Congo." The words of Frantz Fanon, the Third World intellectual of the Fifties, now sound like a prophecy. Congo is the treasure chest of the continent, the vault of African resources, a land that seems to be born to feed an unlimited greed. There is no natural resource that is not present in huge quantities, starting from water and fertile land and ending with the most recent discovery, oil. "A geological scandal", Congo was called: gold, diamonds, copper, tin, uranium, coltan, cobalt, zinc, coal.

It is hard to think that this immense wealth was monopolized for nearly a century by a seventy times smaller country, Belgium.

It is hard to think that the work of "civilization" of Brussels made millions victims, in the early twentieth century, while in Europe they talked about of missionaries and humanitarian work of Dr. Schweitzer.

As it is almost incredible that from 1996 to 2003 the struggle for the partition of the country caused the death, directly or indirectly, of three or four million people and no media gave news of this huge tragedy.

Here everything has always been so exaggerated, as Congo seems to have become a category of spirit, a term used between resignation and fatalism to justify the unjustifiable, to explain the unexplainable, to describe the indescribable. Any reading of reality, even the most distorted, it becomes somewhat plausible. An example? There are people who, given the past ten years, as Kabila father and son's times, regret the era of Mobutu. And those who remember Mobutu miss the Belgian colonial times. In some ways they are right, because things went worse and worse: "Congo history is like a pit dug deeper and deeper", said Roger Ebanda, director of UNHCR in Cameroon, UN agency that deals with refugees.

But every step to hell reminds the responsibility of previous steps. There are two key moments in the recent Congo history: the independence in 1960 and the end of the Mobutu regime in the nineties. In both cases they took the worse path, by continuing to dig the grave started by Belgium for more than 80 years. The difference is that the independence was born by the criminal design of the West, while the failed transition from Mobutu dictatorship is to be charged to Congolese political class.

The independence of the Congo could mark the beginning of redemption for a people humiliated and robbed by ineffable settlers of little Belgium. There was the right man at the right time, and his name was Patrice Lumumba. A true patriot, motivated by an almost mystical sense of political mission, a progressive leader who understood clearly that the ethnic divisions of a huge country like Congo were the instrument of colonial rule: "There is only one tribe – he says - the Congolese nation". People listened to him, followed him. Lumumba challenged, as first Prime Minister of independent Congo, the King Baudouin, reminding him of the serious historical responsibilities of Belgium and announcing that the party at the expense of his people was over. Actually, he was already giving his funeral oration.

No time to celebrate the independence, in fact, and the destabilization comes from the East.

History will repeat itself in some way: Congo chaos was always born east, because here, far from the capital Kinshasa, almost all of the mineral wealth concentrates. In 1960 Katanga region declares secession: Belgian mining companies, starting from the historic "Union minière", have their puppet leader, Moïse Tshombe, and directly commit mercenary troops. In Kinshasa the destabilization was born in the army: Western powers have already found the man of the future in Mobutu Sese Seko,

very astute officer who had studied in missionary schools. Mobutu, born in 1930, just younger than Lumumba, who unfortunately trusts him, just like CIA that keeps him on the payroll. Congo is plunged into a civil war, a conflict that saw the first dispatch of UN peacekeepers in UN history. In Congolese hell even UN General Secretary, Dag Hammarskjold, in a mysterious plane crash dies, as well as a patrol of Italian pilots, slaughtered (someone says cannibalized) in Kindu. The time of Lumumba early comes: January 17, 1961 he is arrested, moved to Katanga and killed in front of Belgian soldiers who lead Tshombe's troops. The fate of Congo is marked: Mobutu Sese Seko, chief of staff, puts an end to instability with the coup of 1965. Now the order reigns in the "land of the great river", Western interests are safe, the looting of the Congo can continue without hindrance.

"The Leopard Totem Man" as he is called by the writer Ahmadou Kourouma, comes from a tribe that has "... as cardinal virtues, lying, stealing and the courage. With courage, he (Mobutu) will wonderfully lie, to steal and kill" (A. Kourouma, "Waiting for the vote of wild beasts"). The term "kleptocracy" seems to be born for him, probably because no one, throughout the continent, stole so much and for so long. In the seventies Mobutu already became one of the richest men on the planet. Strong ally of Washington (and Paris), manages to bring the most awaited boxing match in history, the one between Muhammad Ali (Cassius Clay) and George Foreman, in Kinshasa, in 1974, at the peak of his "politics of authenticity" that was a real farce: while Congo was plunged in corruption and underdevelopment, to the delight of multinational companies in the mining sector, they rediscovered the pride of African roots by simply changing names (the country was renamed Zaire) and organizing large traditional choreography.

Congolese get by in any way, that means, for those who can, adapt themselves to the general robbery. Catholic Church and an opposition movement, founded in 1982, called "Sacred Union" and led by a longtime politician, Etienne Tshisekedi, are the only ones to put up a fight against the regime.

The second great opportunity for Congo arrives with the end of communism and the Cold War in 1989-91. Any semblance of ideological justification failed, and Western countries, United States first, begin to get rid of the most embarrassing dictators. Mobutu is embarrassing more than any other. But he is also rogue, and he knows how to move into the quagmire of Congolese politics, a quagmire in which he managed to drag most of the ruling class. Thus, an endless institutional poker between the dictator and the opposition begins, it should lead to a new constitution and free elections. The Catholic Church presides, as in other African countries, the National Conference, in the person of Monsignor Monsengwo, and Etienne Tshisekedi, the great opponent, leads the transitional government.

"We had a huge task" – now reminds Monsengwo - "First, reviewing the history of the country, then determining the individual and collective responsibilities, and then processing the new form of Congo government, the Third Republic". To complete the difficult transition from dictatorship to democracy, five years were not enough. According to Msgr. Monsengwo, the long process was completed, and it would have been successful if war was not sparked off again in the Eastern regions. For Kisangani Bishop, there are no doubts: "The so-called rebellion was actually a war imported to Congo by foreign powers, just when everything was ready for the elections". In practice, a repeat of the scenario of 1960, when the nation is going to take a decisive step forward, someone is in charge of turning back the clock of history. The reference is to Rwanda and Uganda, and behind them United States. But the version of the foreign conspiracy gracefully removes Congolese elite's responsibility.

Closed in capital buildings, increasingly self-referential, "old and new Zaire's political class is unable of giving birth to the third republic" because it is "mired in formal legal disputes and torn by diatribes for the assignment of seats and sinecures" (Jean Leonard Touadi, "Congo"). Meanwhile, Congo (or Zaire) is a ghost country, "where workers do not work, students do not study, ministers do not govern, presidents do not lead anything, and fighters do not fight", as Congolese researcher writes, Yoka Lye, who compares the period of transition to the sinking of the Titanic: the ship is sinking as the orchestra continues to play.

The facts fully demonstrate that Mobutu had no intention to submit himself to popular opinion: everybody took the bait of his bluff, from Monsengwo to Tshisekedi. And the upheaval in the eastern regions is causing, more than any international intrigue, by a momentous fact: the genocide in Rwanda.

It is the summer of 1994, Tutsi of Rwandan Patriotic Front, by Paul Kagame, starting from their bases in Uganda, quickly defeated the government troops, which planned the genocide of their ethnic group and come in Kigali, crying out for revenge. A Hutu crowd (over a million) took refuge in Congo. Hidden in the tide of desperate people, there are thousands of murderers who participated in genocide, and already dream of revenge: they are the notorious Interahamwe militia. The refugee camps near the borders become their bases. The first to pay for their violence are Tutsi Congolese, called Banyamulenge. The fuse of the explosion of Congo, which someone called "the first African world war" was triggered.

Banyamulenge, as all Tutsi, have a formidable warrior tradition. Supported by Rwanda, they respond to violence with even greater violence. While in Kinshasa they trifled with the elections that never will be (it is October 1996 and Mobutu is still in the saddle), in burning east turns up an old Congolese acquaintance: Laurent-Desire Kabila. Kabila was a "Lumumbist" guerrilla fighter in the sixties, he was born in East (Katanga), and fought by "Che" Guevara's side, who wanted to export the revolution in Congo, but he soon realized that the context does not allow it (his opinion on Congolese rebels and Kabila was completely negative). Hidden for years between Congo and Tanzania, Kabila feels that the appointment with history has arrived. He joins forces with Banyamulenge and their Rwandan sponsors, he forms a coalition of rebels and leaves to conquer Kinshasa, because he knows that Mobutu's regime has reached the end, and Congo will fall into his hands like a rotten pear. It is what many people think, starting from Rwandan Kagame and Museveni from Uganda, both supported by Washington. The time to get rid of Mobutu and seize Congo wealth arrived.

The advance of Kabila's troops (but it could be said of Rwanda) is spectacular: the cities fall one after other, nobody wants to die for Mobutu, the army often surrenders without fighting. In May 1997 Kabila is just outside Kinshasa. Mobutu tries to reach agreement at the last minute, he looks for another mediation, but Kabila "sees" his bluff, also because he already makes arrangements with mining companies, which immediately understand where the wind blows. Mobutu picks up what he can and runs away like a thief in Morocco, where he died of cancer a few months later, in his luxurious villa.

In Kinshasa, to represent any legitimate government, poor Tshisekedi remained, he represents himself in practice. Kabila ignores him completely, he proclaims himself President, and as Tshisekedi is too far with the criticism, he sends him under house arrest. In spite of all the arguments about the legitimacy of the new state of Kabila, who leaves the name Zaire, he is immediately recognized and honored by the whole international community. End of story? No way. Kabila is not a saint, but neither the puppet that Rwandans have the illusion to control. The international commentators, with their usual cynicism, already suggested the creation of a "Tutsi power", friend of Washington and hostile to France in the rich Great Lakes region, with the absorption of the border regions by Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda. Kabila is not in, and gets rid of Rwandans. In response, Rwanda sparks off war through two different Congolese factions created ad hoc. Uganda makes the same. Kabila asks for help to Namibia, Angola, Zimbabwe. Sudan is involved. Everyone against everyone, into a total anarchy.

In the absence of anything better, we speak of ethnic conflict (which is always good for Africa). In Congolese bloody chaos they do not understand anything.

In fact, what occurs in Congo is an already seen scenario: it is called "geopolitics of chaos", and it is only the exacerbation of the global turbo-capitalism, reluctant to the idea of state and political impediments, not to mention ethical constraints. The logic of profit at all costs, sooner or later, ends up showing his criminal face. It is also clear that everyone does business by whatever he has; for many Africans, the shortest path is the one of weapons. Every faction controls a piece of land, where there are mineral resources, which are contracted out to those who can provide money and

weapons, ie those who can handle large deals on a global scale. The system somehow works, because, just as an example, the coltan needed for the manufacture of mobile phones has never been lacking in the years of war in Congo, which has more than 70 percent of world production. Millions of unaware and happy consumers bring a little bit of (bloody) Congo in their mobile phone, and western media are careful not to inform people how much the war economy costs to Congolese people. It took five years (and three or four million dead) so that the peace agreements of Sun City in 2003 came, with the strong contribution of the international community. Meanwhile, Kabila senior was killed by his bodyguard, and his son Joseph took his place. For better or worse he is the author of peace, and that is why the Eastern regions will give him a large vote. The fragile balance of Congo, based on co-optation to the power of all the warring factions, with an interim president (Kabila) and four vice-presidents, somehow held up until the elections of 2006. Decisive was also the change in attitude of UN. In the case of Congo United Nations have some merits: they reported officially, on paper, the role played by multinationals in the mining sector in the war, in two subsequent reports (April 2001 and October 2002). The list is long, and covers some 85 groups, excluding intermediaries and financial covering. There is something to suit everybody's fancy, from Belgium to Canada, the United States to Great Britain, and, last but not least, China. Italy is absent, but it is a fate (it was in Somalia, as witnessed by Ilaria Alpi). Just as an example of the wonders of globalization, a part of the Congolese coltan was bought by an American company ("Eagle Wings") it followed the road to Rwanda, it was falsely invoiced in Mozambique, it ended in Kazakhstan or China to be refined, and then it arrived in Europe through the good offices of a subsidiary company of Bayer, the legendary pharmaceutical company (UN Report, October 16, 2002).

Thus, the so-called international agenda was changed, and Congo finally became a priority. In subsequent echelons, some 17 thousand peacekeepers were sent into the country (MONUC, currently the largest UN mission in the world) and 500 million dollars were invested just to allow elections. The fatal appointment came after yet another postponement, on July 30, 2006. The response of Congolese was extraordinary: more than 70 percent of voters, more than 20 million people, went to the polls in absolute discipline in an country, as large as Western Europe and virtually without roads. The voting process, with few exceptions, was carried out with a miraculous zeal, for a reality where nothing works properly.

The vote for president focused on Joseph Kabila and Jean Pierre Bemba, who went on the second ballot in last year October (Kabila won, then, with 58 percent of the votes). Bemba was one of four vice-presidents of the interim government, as he led a faction in Congolese civil war, the MLC, supported by Uganda. He is the son of a wealthy businessman closely linked to Mobutu, and against him (as for all the warlords and Kabila as well) there are many charges of war crimes. He set up most of his electoral campaign on the fact that Kabila was not Congolese and represented foreign interests. The factions of the two candidates faced each other twice by gunfire in the capital, and this made fear the worst, but then everything was fixed. Kabila, whose mother grew up in Rwanda and Tanzania and Uganda, has never responded to provocations, because he is a very shy person. Only 35 (like Lumumba), he had to lead the country in the most difficult phase. The elections created huge expectations, but Congolese democracy could prove itself very little, especially if, turned off media spotlight, the presence of the international community (and MONUC forces) got weaker and one continued to think of Congo as a country to be exploited with impunity. Kabila, in these three years, did not change the management of resources one jot. And all former militiamen integrated into the national army could soon grow tired of their ridiculous wage (20 dollars a month), especially if international aid were lacking, and they could do again what they do best, ie robbing people (and raping women). Now, everybody was granted impunity (except some rare cases), and getting away is not the best deterrent to crime again.

But Congolese people did not choose only their legitimate president (definitely opting for the less damaging candidate, at least compared to Bemba). They also elected the first true parliament of their history, in a republic where the president has not all the powers. In the choice of deputies, they expressed their opinion on Congolese political class: eighty percent of the elected people is to the

first assignment, a plethora of old rogue remains unemployed. And the Supreme Court played its role of absolute impartial arbiter. In other words, democratic institutions begin to function in a country that does not know what the State is.

Is it too little? Italian ambassador in Kinshasa, Leonardo Baroncelli is optimistic: "As long as there is stability, as peace can stand up, in three years Congo will be unrecognizable in a positive way". Kabila said he wants to make the country "The China of Africa". Who knows. In fact, for the first time since the death of Lumumba, the country can hope for a better future. But it is better not to believe promises of easy economic development nor elections as a magic wand that creates democracy. The scandal of a rich country with a miserable population should be over. And facing this shame, we have never again to say, simply, "It is Congo."

Cesare Sangalli