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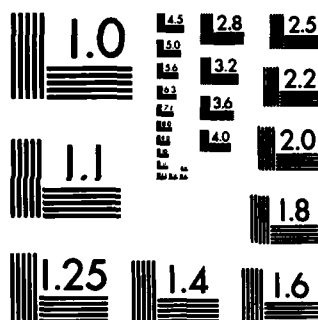
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ZAIRIAN POLITICAL CONDITIONS AND
PROSPECTS FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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The aim of this paper is to provide, in cursory form, an examination of some of the factors which need to be weighed in any evaluation of Zaire's contemporary political conditions and potential for long-term economic development. ~~To do this, I shall present~~ two different approaches to the question of political stability and economic development. Each assumes that political stability is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for economic development and that, therefore, the latter cannot occur in the absence of the former. The first approach is a conventional analysis of political trends and developments; the second is a longer-term perspective based on a culturally-enracinated and largely implicit understanding of the moral matrix of legitimate governance in Zaire.

APPROACH I

Traditionally, most academic political scientists define political stability as the absence of a change in regime. In this light, Zaire has been remarkably stable since the coup of 24 November 1965. President Mobutu has controlled his country's political destiny for almost nineteen years--a record of continuity which few other African leaders, or regimes, can match--despite his increasing unpopularity and a serious erosion of political legitimacy in the eyes of most Zairian citizens. Why has Mobutu endured?

First, although it is often overlooked amid contemporary press coverage of corruption and Zaire's economic decline, when Mobutu seized power in 1965 he was a genuinely popular figure. The politicians of the First Republic had lost all semblance of legitimacy and the army's seizure of power was hailed throughout the country. Even today, no one in Zaire wishes to return to the political disorder of the pre-Mobutu era. This initial spurt of legitimacy and popularity has gone a long way and Mobutu's actions in 1965 provided a fund of political credit on which he has been able to draw over the years.

Second, Mobutu is an extraordinarily skillful politician. He is a master at dividing political opposition and is equally adept at keeping his supporters off balance, thus preventing them from building and maintaining independent bases of power from which they might challenge his political supremacy. The frequent and systematic rotation of offices among mandarins of the regime keeps them dependent upon Mobutu's good will

for continued access to state office. This is all the more crucial in Zaire since access to the state, and its coffers, remains the principal source of capital accumulation in the country. Two tendencies result: first, most high-ranking officials know that a fall from grace can occur at any time and they therefore spend as much time and effort as possible pursuing private wealth; second, since they know that their money-making activities derive, in the last analysis, from their positions in the state hierarchy, they remain politically dependent on the president's good will. Moreover, President Mobutu encourages this dependence through frequent "gifts" to his close military and civilian collaborators. These financial perquisites constitute a significant source of income for the high-ranking official. In a related vein, Mobutu is also skillful at the game of ethnic balancing and co-optation. Despite the increasing tendency to place Equateurians in important and sensitive positions, Mobutu usually manages to include representatives of other regions in his high councils, thus assuring the regime of at least the appearance of national representation.

Third, President Mobutu is extremely well informed on events in all parts of Zaire. This is largely due to the efforts of the Agence Nationale de Documentation (AND), the political police apparatus. Western press coverage emphasizing mismanagement and governmental inefficiency notwithstanding, the AND is extremely efficient and effective at gathering political, economic, social, and cultural information in even remote areas of Zaire. This is accomplished through an extensive network of paid informers. While reports of the administration and political party are systematically distorted to show their authors in the best light possible, AND communications are extremely accurate and report even the minutiae of everyday life: prices in local markets; violations of price regulations; formation of cultural groups; and which officials of state and party abuse the population through theft, extortion, illegal taxation, or other devices. In consequence, should citizens try to organize themselves politically against the regime, the authorities will soon know it and take appropriate action. Most Zairians have come to fear the AND and its informers and this organization--whose excesses Amnesty International has documented--is one of those primarily responsible for spreading a climate of fear throughout the country.

Fourth, the state's coercive arms--the Forces Armees Zairoises (FAZ), the Gendarmerie Nationale (GDN), and the party youth wing's Corps des Activistes pour la Defense de la Revolution (CADER)--have instilled a reign of terror throughout urban and rural areas. Soldiers, gendarmes, and CADER are vicious, brutal, and extractive in their dealings with the population. Since they are badly paid, and more than occasionally never paid because their superiors divert the funds destined for their salaries, these uniformed services make life miserable for those they encounter. In consequence, they steal, levy illegal taxes, extract illegal fines, and generally extort resources from the population. Should anyone be so foolhardy as to resist these attentions, they can expect a period of less than pleasant arbitrary arrest, detention, and even--at times--physical

torture. In general, the armed and uniformed services of the state behave as though they were a conquering army in occupied territory. Although the FAZ and GDN have never covered themselves with glory when faced with opponents who could shoot back (witness Angola in 1975, Shaba I in 1977, and Shaba II in 1978), they are more than capable of making short shrift of an essentially unarmed opposition consisting of peasants, students, schoolteachers, or workers. Massacres in Idiofa in 1978, Katekelayi in 1979, and the repression of the population in Shaba in the wake of Shaba II bear eloquent testimony to the fact that the FAZ and GDN usually treat fellow citizens somewhat less than gently. Even in Equateur Region, soldiers and gendarmes constitute a significant free-floating and largely uncontrolled source of oppression and violence with which villagers have to contend daily. People know that the soldiers can appear at almost any time and that when they do violence will ensue. This, in itself, constitutes a powerful disincentive for those who might be happier if the Mobutiste order were to disappear. Anyone having once lived through the descent of a platoon of gendarmes on their village has no desire to see the experience repeated.

Finally, the last, and in some ways the most important reason for the continuity and stability of the Mobutu regime is the substantial external support it has received from the U.S., France, Belgium, private commercial banks, the IMF, and the IBRD. Although it cannot be proved, it seems likely that had the Western powers not intervened militarily and logistically during Shaba II, the regime would have fallen. Western financial support is also crucial for it provides the regime with ready "pin money" so necessary to fuel the conspicuous consumption which Mobutu and his mandarins have come to enjoy. As Mobutu's internal-political support has eroded over the years, he has skillfully moved to fill this political space with support from the outside. In these matters, and for reasons of their own, the Western powers, private banks, and multilateral organizations have been only too happy to accommodate.

Although these five reasons make it seem unlikely that a change of regime will occur in the near future, such a possibility does exist and, though remote, should not be dismissed out of hand. In descending order of probability such a change could conceivably come from the following sources:

1. Military coup: On the face of it, this possibility seems unlikely. Mobutu has filled the FAZ with politically loyal high-ranking officers from his own region whom he keeps off balance by rotating frequently. The generals and colonels also know that the slightest deviation from the approved political line could result in instant demotion, imprisonment, and a well publicized treason trial. In addition, the officer corps is fractured by Mobutu's penchant for diversifying the external sources military training and support. Furthermore, Mobutu is willing to tolerate, and perhaps even encourage, egregious incompetence among his officers. An

incompetent general is, by definition, less of a threat than a competent one. But not much is known about the lieutenants and sergeants in the FAZ. Recent events elsewhere in Africa (Ghana, Liberia) demonstrate at least the possibility that a group of lower-ranking officers and noncommissioned officers could mount a coup on their own.

2. Shaba III coupled with urban revolt: Should border difficulties with Zambia increase and should Zairian relations with Angola deteriorate further, it is possible that the FNLC could find an external host that would be willing to let them operate against the regime in an unimpeded manner. A Shaba III coupled with widespread urban rioting/insurrection could topple the regime. The latter half of this formula could be accomplished either through the schoolteachers (who managed to achieve some semblance of national organization during their strikes in the early 1980s) or the newly formed and illegal opposition party, the UDPS.

3. External adventures in Angola and Cabinda: Cabinda has long been a twinkle in Mobutu's eye. Should the FAZ become embroiled with Savimbi's UNITA in an adventure there, there is the possibility that it could set off either of the two previous options.

4. Withdrawal of external support: Should any of the three options listed above come to pass and were the Western powers and multilateral financial organizations to withdraw their support of the regime, there is little doubt that the Mobutiste order would fall.

It should, however, be emphasized that none of these four options is likely to come about at this time and that, by conventional and traditional standards of regime continuity and political stability, President Mobutu seems as firmly entrenched in power as he has ever been. It is nonetheless my contention that analyses such as the preceding one are short-sighted and that political stability needs to be considered in an entirely different way.

APPROACH II

This perspective begins from the observation that there is, at virtually every level of Zairian state and society, a widespread and thoroughly pervasive imagery of father and family. For example, when asked about their idealized vision of a bureaucratic superior, bureaucrats in the town of Lisala remarked with near unanimity that, in their view, an ideal administrative superior should have the following characteristics: he should be patient and instruct his subordinates; be a repository of moral virtue; be open, sociable, listen to the opinions, and care for those under his control; he should also be competent, decisive, dynamic, and authoritative. When queried, many of the bureaucrats explicitly recognized that, in their opinion, a good administrative superior ought to

behave as a "bon pere de famille," as a good father of the family. This notion of administrator as an idealized father is common in Zaire and appears at all levels of the state's hierarchy. It is found not only in the responses of bureaucrats to specific questions, but also in the formal directives and instructions which emanate from national and regional authorities. Indeed, most bureaucrats and citizens expect that their cases will not be decided by a letter-of-the-law bureaucrat operating in accordance with impersonal Weberian bureaucratic norms, but by a "bon pere de famille." Correspondence requesting some service, or funding, will often close, for example, with a flowery phrase reminding the addressee that that he is a "good father." In all these instances, it is but a short leap from father to family and bureaucrats will often liken their particular administrative service to a large family.

In addition, President Mobutu and his mandarins quite consciously employ the same paternal and familial imagery and symbols. Thus, the state-controlled media will portray Zaire as a vast family; the Mouvement Populaire de la Revolution (MPR) will also be depicted as a family to which all Zairians belong; and, perhaps most importantly, President Mobutu will be described, and describe himself, as the father of the large Zairian family. Indeed, it is difficult to pick up a newspaper without seeing a prominent story on one of the president's paternal gestures. A new administrative building, a new road, a rebuilt hospital, a replenished supply of pharmaceutical products are all paternal and magnanimous gestures from "the father" to his "children," the people of Zaire. They all demonstrate, furthermore, the paternal love, care, and solicitude which Mobutu lavishes on his children. The media portray the president as a loving, generous, caring father figure whose every waking moment is devoted to the well-being of his family.

On one level, all this is part of a consciously-orchestrated personality cult. All Zairian media actively sing the praises of President Mobutu and seek to glorify his existence. In the nearly twenty years it has been in power the regime has been remarkably successful at diffusing this imagery throughout society despite the cynicism with which ordinary folk often greet such coverage. The reasons for this success at diffusing the imagery of father and family may be ascribed, first, to the consciously-adopted policy of the regime; second, the Zaire's precolonial political heritage in which many chiefs were thought to embody paternal virtues; and third, to the legacy of more than fifty years of Belgian colonial rule which was, itself, markedly paternal.

The major reason, therefore, why the images of father and family are so pervasive in Zaire is that they strike a resonant and deeply-embedded cultural chord. They form part of a culturally valid and largely implicit comprehension of the limits of political legitimacy based on a complex and largely unarticulated moral matrix of legitimate governance derived from an idealized vision of patterns of authority and behavior within the family. Due to limitations of time and space I shall present this moral matrix only in broad outline.

The first major premise of the moral matrix is that of nurture. There is, in other words, an implicit promise of nurture and paternal care. The "father" is not necessarily the biological sire, but rather the one who nurtures, protects, and provides security. Implicit, also, is the assumption that the father must, in fact, provide for his children or else lose legitimacy. The second major premise of the moral matrix is that the "father" must permit his "children" to grow up. In other terms, he must not seek to eternalize himself in power and must eventually give way as the children grow and mature. Here, too, the implicit corollary is that a father who stays around too long will, in the long run, lose legitimacy.

The imagery which, in the final analysis, stems from the foundation of the moral matrix is attractive to many because it fulfills a universal psychological need for an assurance of security. The imagery is also powerful because it creates an intimacy between rulers and ruled and thus succeeds in rendering complex political realities in a highly simplified form. Lastly, the metaphors of father and family are "natural." Since we can all envisage the idea of a father and a family, the image of the ruler as the father of a national family has immediacy and is instantly comprehensible. Moreover, in Africa, where family and kinship are more important than in the West, the imagery is even more powerful and compelling.

With this by way of background, we can now evaluate how well President Mobutu has lived up to the implicit strictures of the moral-matrix of legitimate governance. Clearly, as far as the first premise of the moral matrix is concerned, in recent years Mobutu's disastrous economic policies have come a cropper and standards of living have fallen precipitately for all but the wealthiest. Second, despite an initial promise to relinquish power after five years, Mobutu has shown no signs of preparing an orderly transition. On both counts, then, it would appear that Mobutu is in violation of the tenets of this unarticulated, yet culturally valid, moral matrix.

There is, of course, another problem. Quite simply, despite the validity of the moral matrix itself, there are significant ways in which Mobutu and his regime have misapplied and perverted the imagery associated with it. For example, as we have seen, the press makes much of the president's paternal "gifts" to his "children." To be sure, gratitude is expected in return. In Zaire, as in most societies with prominent kinship systems, Mobutu's assumption of the role of the generous father of the nation speaks directly to a broad cultural understanding of reciprocity and obligation among kinsmen and subtly reminds people that they have a moral obligation to reciprocate the fatherly gestures of generosity he showers on them. Mobutu distributes largesse to the population and, in return, an implicit moral and material debt is created. The billions of dollars that Mobutu extracts from the Zairian people is thus only his

due. The father bestows gifts on his children and what he receives in return is merely the payment of an outstanding and never-ending obligation. Through clever manipulation of the image of a generous father, Mobutu has managed to create a system in which all that he receives is but the demonstration of a culturally-rooted concept of mutual exchange. There is, then, neither theft, nor corruption, nor exploitation; there are only grateful "children" repaying their "father."

There is also the often used image of the MPR as a political family and the consequent observation that the children of a family do not divide themselves into majority and minority clans. Here, too, the imagery is perverted to obfuscate and denigrate fundamental principles of democratic rule and procedure. Those who have the temerity to rebel, or even question, the wisdom of the "father" are portrayed not as responsible citizens, but rather as wayward and misguided children. Obviously, such children have to be disciplined, for the father who loves must also know how to punish. Thus, political repression is often presented not for what it is, but rather as firm parental discipline exercised both for the good of the entire family as well as for the good of those few, wayward and errant, children. Mobutu's explicit use of these metaphors in his public discussions of the thirteen dissident parliamentarians demonstrates the point convincingly.

The paternal and familial metaphors are so dominant in Zairian political thought and discourse that they are employed even by those who have openly broken with the regime. For example, former Prime Minister Nguza recently stated: "Yes, I accuse Mr. Mobutu of having committed an economic crime. The crime is all the more cruel that it is perpetrated by the one who even passes himself off as Father and Protector of the nation." The argument, therefore, is not that Mobutu is wrong to adopt these paternal and familial symbols, but rather that in doing so he has failed to live up to some unstated normative standard or, in terms of this analysis, the implicit strictures of the moral matrix of legitimate governance. The problem arises, then, neither because of metaphor nor matrix, but rather because Mobutu has violated the implicit cultural understandings which govern political legitimacy in his own society.

Although Mobutu and the people around him have abused the symbols of father and family, it would be shortsighted to view these cynical manipulations merely of the ideological ploys of a corrupt and rapacious class intent on maintaining power. There are elements of that, to be sure. But even so, we still need to ask why the images of father and family have been chosen for ideological presentation rather than some others? The reason is that such imagery is culturally relevant and strikes a responsive chord; that legitimate governance in Zaire is based on the tacit normative idea that government stands in the same relationship to its citizens that a father does to his children. There is a substratum of belief that views paternal authority as legitimate as long as the implicit understanding of rights and duties contained in the moral

matrix of legitimate governance is not violated. When Zairian political leaders behave as responsible fathers; when they care for, nurture, and provide security; when they do not seek to eternalize themselves in power and respect the normal rotation of generations; legitimacy, and thus stability, is maintained. But when the implied cultural norms of political "fatherhood" are violated, tensions will mount and instability, repression, or both, will ensue. The problem in Zaire is not these these images are present, but rather that the unstated cultural norms which they imply have been ignored. The real tragedy is that Mobutu's misapplications and manipulations of the images of father and family may well discredit, over the long term, a culturally valid basis for the organization of legitimate political authority. It is for this reason that the second of these approaches sees Zairian political stability and the continuity of Mobutu's regime as fragile and evanescent commodities which cannot endure much longer.

Bibliographic Note: Approach II is drawn from a chapter of a book-length manuscript currently in progress entitled Politics and State in Zaire: The Mechanics of Coercion in Lisala.

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