



THE LAST

The next few months will probably write the final chapter in President Mobutu Sese Seko's nearly three decades-long rule. The national conference is determined to

reduce Mobutu's role to a titular one and get on with Zaire's transition to democracy. The dictator, on the other hand, is determined to continue his now-tenuous grasp on power. The outcome may ultimately depend on who controls the Zairian security forces.



ore than two years after President Mobutu Sese Seko announced the abolition of the one-party state and the introduction of a limited liberal democracy, Zaire is still under the grip of the despot who has ruled with an iron hand for 27

years. Zaire's national conference, the longest running, and ironically the least fruitful such forum on the African continent, resumed its work in late July, following a month's break to allow its 23 committees time to complete their reports on a variety of matters concerning the transition to democracy. The expected decisions of the conference, which is likely to strip Mobutu of all but ceremonial powers, have heightened tensions and set the stage for an historic confrontation between Mobutu and the most popular assembly of prominent political actors in the country's history.

This is the closest that Zaire, the large central African nation of 35 million people, has come to ousting Mobutu, whose one-man rule has been characterized by consistent and institutionalized human rights abuses. The national conference has thus far traveled a treacherous and difficult road, frequently punctuated by mass killings of Zairians by the security and armed forces. This time,

there is realistic hope that the long wait for a democratic government may soon be over. But like other important historical points in Zaire for the last three decades, Mobutu's place in this latest chapter of a tortured nation will be the determinant factor.

When Mobutu announced on April 24, 1990 that he would institute a series of reforms, including lifting the ban on independent political activity, there was an incredibly loud and effective global agitation against one-party dictatorships. It seemed implausible then that he would still be hanging on several years later. But the master manipulator has employed a continuum of effective cynical moves, supplemented frequently with brutal and ghastly massacres to halt the democracy train. One such incident was the massacre in May 1990 of several hundred students at the University of Lubumbashi. His most effective card, however, has been the security and armed forces, which he has used to intimidate, repeatedly postpone, and defy the national conference.

Right from the start, the national conference has been plagued by bitter disagreements between Mobutu and the Sacred Union, a loose coalition of more than 150 opposition parties, over the powers that the conference would wield, who would convene it, and the legal status of its decisions. The opposition has always demanded that the conference be a sovereign body with the powers of a constituent assembly. In effect, they have asked that the conference have the power to completely reformulate

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and reconstitute the nature of the state and all of its office-holders, in particular President Mobutu. In response, Mobutu has continually asserted that the conference only exercise advisory and recommendatory authority.

It is on this crucial issue that deadlock has repeatedly occurred. A year ago, after months of political maneuvering, Mobutu allowed the conference to open. But it collapsed several weeks later after Mobutu rigged it with his hand-picked conferees. The political crisis and the disin-

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tegrating economy led to widespread killings and looting by soldiers, leaving hundreds of Zairians dead. In the wake of the killings, Mobutu and the Sacred Union agreed to form a government of national unity, with Etienne Tshisekedi wa Mulumba as prime minister. Mobutu unceremoniously sacked Tshisekedi a week later amid disagreements on how much power he would have. He sought to appoint a more pliable opposition leader.

On October 26, Tshisekedi was replaced as prime minister by Bernardin Mungul Diaka, who crossed over to Mobutu's side. In late November, the discredited Diaka was himself replaced by Nguza Karl-I-Bond, the leader of the Union of Federalists and Independent Republicans, a prominent partner in the Sacred Union. The Union promptly expelled Nguza, the Mobutu supplicant-turned-opposition leader. Soon after Mobutu's seven-year term as president expired on December 4, the national conference was restarted. Since then, Mobutu has remained in power unconstitutionally. On December 12, the national conference elected Roman Archbishop Monsengwo Pasinya its chairman.

On January 19 this year, Nguza suspended the national conference charging that it was inciting ethnic rivalries. The real reason, though, appeared to have been the conference's determination to assume full sovereign powers and to deliberate openly on Mobutu's maladministration of Zaire. The move sparked off widespread protests throughout the country demanding that the government re-open the conference. One of these protests, a "peace and hope" march by Christians, was brutally repressed on February 16 by security forces in Kinshasa, killing at least 33 people.

The killings drew world-wide condemnation and increased the pressure on Mobutu to re-open the conference. Mobutu had promised on two prior occasions that the conference would be re-opened, each time without result. In fact, in early March, Mobutu had announced new conditions for the resumption of the conference, including the number of participants, its mandate and period of deliberation. The opposition correctly saw the move as intended to stymie the forum and rob it of its independence.

Finally, on March 27, bowing to domestic and international pressure, Mobutu asked Archbishop Pasinya to make the necessary preparations to resume deliberations. Soon after the conference re-opened, the central question of its powers was quickly taken up. With the opposition parties taking the lead, the more than 2,400 delegates from political parties, public institutions, professional groups, and the government, declared that the conference had sovereign powers to draw up a new constitution and legislation governing a competitive electoral system. This action was a remarkable achievement for the conference and a stunning defeat for Mobutu. It legitimized the conference.

Since its resumption, the conference has addressed virtually every sphere of Zairian life, including Mobutu's own role in running the country into the ground. As testimony to its courage, the conference openly debated the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the country's first and only democratically elected prime minister, a hitherto taboo subject. Mobutu and the Central Intelligence Agency were implicated in that murder. While opposition leaders re-stated Mobutu's role in the slaying, his supporters charged that Tshisekedi and Joseph Ileo, the leader of the Christian Social Democratic Party (PDSC), were also involved.

The remarkable progress of the conference and its determination to put an end to Mobutu's rule have panicked the wily dictator. On June 15, in a statement read over national radio and television, Mobutu declared that only he, and not the conference, had the right to name a prime minister. He said that the national conference had no power to make any constitutional changes. Following the speech, which underlined Mobutu's intransigence and refusal to bow to the conference, tensions rose sharply as demonstrators stoned government vehicles. Archbishop Monsengwo appealed for calm and assured the public that Mobutu could not stop the conference from naming a prime minister and a transitional government. He reiterated that these actions were within the mandate of the conference.

In an interview on June 20, Mobutu emphasized that the conference lacked legitimacy and threatened to suspend it again if it overstepped its bounds. He said, "It is I who convened the conference, it is I who created it, it is I who organized it." He noted that he had no intention of suspending the conference, although he had done so twice "each time there was an attempt for things to get out of hand, like a good head of the family." He warned that he would suspend it "again a third, a fourth, a fifth time" if it went beyond its mandate.

Mobutu's insidious efforts to block the process of liberalization are described and analyzed in a recent report written for Africa Watch, the human rights group, by Peter Rosenblum, a leading expert on human rights conditions in Zaire. The report, *Zaire: Two Years Without a Transition*, states in part that "Mobutu's efforts to sabotage the conference had included a 'pilgrimage' to the Vatican, bribes to conference members,

and a public campaign to re-direct the work of the conference."

According to knowledgeable sources, Mobutu's trip to the Vatican was intended to curry favor with the Pope in the hope that the Holy See would slow down Archbishop Monsengwo. It was also significant that Mobutu's trip took place before the archbishop visited Washington and other European capitals to draw attention to Zaire's continuing crisis and to drum up support for the national conference.

If Mobutu intended to undermine Western support for Monsengwo's visit, then the effort was wasted because the cleric received a senior statesman's audience wherever he went. During this visit to Washington, long the heart of Mobutu's support in the West, Archbishop Monsengwo was warmly received by Secretary of State James Baker. He later said that Baker had promised the administration's support for the national conference.

At the National Press Club in Washington, Monsengwo warned of an "apocalypse" if the national conference failed to bring democracy to Zaire. But he left no doubt about the will of the conference to break with the repressive past. He emphasized that at the end of its deliberations, the conference would "draft a fundamental charter for the transition for a competent and credible transitional government, give the country a new constitution for the third republic, create an electoral commission to organize and supervise elections, and finally establish an electoral calendar."

After the 23 committees set up by the conference finish presenting their reports, the forum will then be confronted with the hard choice of stripping Mobutu of his extensive and authoritarian powers, an action he will most certainly resist. According to the so-called "radical opposition," the majority in the national conference, the delegates are determined to snap Mobutu's stranglehold on power, leaving him as titular head of state during the transition, a period that could last up to two years. According to this plan, the prime minister would be the chief executive and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. He would not be accountable to the president, in this case Mobutu. Mobutu, reduced to a ceremonial figurehead, would "reign but not rule," and would be subordinate to the prime minister.

For now, the opposition's vision of Mobutu's role during the transition appears to be supported by the U.S., France, and Belgium, the three most influential countries in Zaire. In April, the U.S. State Department said that it and the other two governments had asked Mobutu to cede power and become a purely titular head of state. Rosenblum cautiously welcomes this change in U.S. foreign policy, but adds, "President Mobutu has retained the ability to intervene and block any momentum toward reform. This ability depends on the continued support he has had from the U.S. in particular."

The next few months will determine where Zaire goes from here. If the security forces abandon Mobutu, and

throw their lot in with the national conference, the long road to recovery will begin in earnest. On the other hand, if they choose to stick with Mobutu and stay on the path of confrontation, Zaire could easily be shredded. Rosenblum has mixed feelings. "While I believe in the power of public opinion to change society, I am not convinced that Mobutu will accept a government with genuine power over the security forces and the country's finances." After a long pause, he adds, "I would not be surprised if the recommendations of the conference were blocked and the people were forced to take to the streets. In that case, I do not believe that Mobutu could survive another February 16 massacre."

As the conference resumed its deliberations on July 20, all eyes were fixed on Mobutu and Etienne Tshisekedi, the key figure in the "radical opposition." What the two men decide will determine whether a peaceful transition will take place to avoid further chaos and bloodshed. In August, the conference named Tshisekedi, Mobutu's long-time foe, to the premiership. Among others mentioned as possible candidates by the Sacred Union were Thomas Kanza, an academic from one of Zaire's most famous political families.

A number of events just before the conference resumed its deliberations might, however, have weakened the hand of the Sacred Union, in particular the majority radical wing, as it prepared to confront Mobutu. Several influential partners have deserted or challenged the positions of the Sacred Union at a time when unity was most needed. Nsinga Udjuu, a political actor who in June created the Alliance of Independent Forces of Change (AFCD), which encompasses 12 political parties, has distanced himself from the Union. Udjuu, a former minister of justice, and currently the agriculture minister, told reporters that AFCD would play the role of an arbiter between Mobutu and the Sacred Union.

Another threat to the unity of the national conference arose in June when Antoine Gizenga, a former cabinet minister, formed the Union of Nationalist Lumumbiste Forces (UFONAL), which has denounced many of the proposals put forward by the Sacred Union. In July, UFONAL escalated its isolation when it announced that Gizenga would be its candidate for the premiership, in direct competition with Tshisekedi.

To complicate matters further, Kamitatu Massamba, the vice president of the PDSC, the second largest party after the Union for Democracy and Social Progress in the Sacred Union, announced in early July that he would also challenge the premiership. But Kamitatu appeared to have run afoul of the national conference because he announced his candidacy after meeting with Mobutu. Many saw Mobutu's hand in this move, charging that it was intended to block Tshisekedi. Whatever the outcome of these latest realignments, they could not help the conference at a time when it faces its greatest challenge. But for now, the stage appears to be set for what may turn out to be the last chapter of the Mobutu saga.