

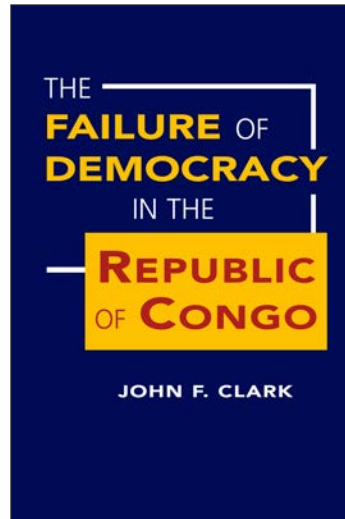
EXCERPTED FROM

The Failure of Democracy in the Republic of Congo

John F. Clark

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ISBN: 978-1-58826-555-5 hc



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

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Boulder, CO 80301 USA
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fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the
Lynne Rienner Publishers website
www.rienner.com

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The Republic of Congo: Failure of a Democratic Experiment

This book is an exploration of a specific, concrete question about the social world: why did the experiment in multiparty democratic government in the Republic of Congo¹ fail in 1997? As with most questions about the social world, the answer can be either a simple, straightforward one or an elaborate dissertation. The more the striking complexity of the social world is appreciated, the more likely a detailed exposition is valued. The careful examination of the Congo case can, in the first instance, provide accurate information to theoretically minded scholars examining a phenomenon across many cases. Yet, this case study is intended to do more: it also seeks to remind us explicitly that each case is unique, and that each can only be understood fully in the terms that the actors themselves used, that is, from the inside out.

I pay close attention in the study to theoretical work in several areas related to democratization, including political culture, political economy, ethnic and regional identity formation, and constitutional design. Congo, like better-studied African cases, has something to tell us about the theoretical debates in each of these areas of inquiry, and I seek to highlight those lessons, whether Congo emerges as a case in point or a difficult anomaly. I also make a serious effort to situate the Congolese experiment with democracy within the country's historical context. Few aspects of Congo's economy, political values, or ethnic sensibilities can be deeply appreciated without abundant allusion to their historical roots.

In this introductory chapter, I undertake four tasks. The first is to present a barebones overview of the democratic experiment in Congo. Every significant aspect of this historical review will be explored in more detail in the following chapters. The overview is a necessary prerequisite of a second immediate task, a further explication of the research question. This task involves in particular a specification of the terms used with reference to the Congo case. Third, I take up the question of the relevance of the research question, leading in turn to a brief discussion of some other bodies of literature in relation to that on democratization. Finally, I provide an outline of the remainder of the book. Although the logic of the organization will only

become fully apparent in Chapter 2, some readers will inevitably want to know immediately how the study will unfold.

■ An Overview of the Democratic Experiment in Congo

The multiparty experiment in the Congo Republic began in 1991, along with a wave of other similar such experiments that began sweeping the African continent in 1989. In the case of Congo, a military dictator operating under the ideological cover of Marxist-Leninism, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, was forced to cede power to an interim regime following a three-month national conference ending in mid-1991 (Clark 1993).² In August of the following year, Sassou stood against several other challengers in a presidential election, but failed to secure enough votes to proceed to the second round. A new president, Pascal Lissouba, a scientist, former UNESCO official, and veteran Congolese politician, finished first in the first round with 36 percent, and won a majority (61 percent) in the second.

Over the course of its short life, the Congolese experiment with multiparty politics underwent a series of severe challenges, the first coming during the transition period. One crisis involved efforts by the transitional government to rein in the army, accompanied by alleged coup plots; a second involved alleged cheating by the transitional government in the local and municipal elections of May 1992 (*Africa Confidential*, "Characteristic Ambiguity," 6 March 1992: 5; *Africa Confidential*, "Testing the Waters of Democracy," 19 June 1992: 6–7). Congo later experienced fierce fighting among militia groups and the army in 1993 and early 1994. The experiment essentially came to an end in mid-1997 when a full-blown civil war broke out only weeks before scheduled national elections.

Soon after the election of Lissouba in 1992 a crisis far more serious than those of the transition erupted. This one was occasioned by the collapse of the president's coalition in Parliament. Lissouba had won the second round of the elections by forging a partnership with former president Sassou and his party, the Parti Congolais du Travail (PCT).³ Through this alliance, Lissouba not only won the presidency, but also controlled a majority in the National Assembly. His own Union Panafricaine pour la Démocratie Sociale (UPADS) party held thirty-nine seats and Sassou's PCT held eighteen after the legislative elections; with the cooperation of some smaller parties, Lissouba's coalition commanded a majority in the 125-seat body. When Lissouba announced the formation of his first government in September, however, Sassou's PCT only received three minor cabinet posts. Insulted, Sassou abandoned the coalition, and made an alliance with Lissouba's strongest competitor, Bernard Kolélas. Kolélas himself had finished second in the presidential balloting, winning 39 percent in the second round, while his Mouvement Congolais Pour le Développement et la

Démocratie Intégrale (MCDDI) party had won twenty-nine seats in the Assembly, the second highest total. When the new coalition was formed,⁴ it controlled a majority in the Assembly.

Rather than naming a prime minister from this opposition coalition, as the constitution required, however, Lissouba dissolved the Assembly and ordered the holding of new elections the following year. When the opposition did not concede to this “solution,” a major confrontation ensued. Opposition partisans demonstrated outside the office of the president in December, and Lissouba’s presidential guard fired on them, killing three. Toward the end of the year, the crisis was temporarily resolved when Lissouba was persuaded to appoint a “national unity” government, headed by a neutral prime minister.

The rerun of the legislative elections in May 1993 marked the beginning of an even more serious crisis, a round of fighting that the Congolese later called their first civil war. In the presence of international observers, Lissouba’s new coalition of his UPADS and many smaller parties won a total of sixty-two seats in the Assembly.⁵ Even with eleven seats still undecided because of a lack of majority in the first round, it was clear that Lissouba’s coalition had won a majority. Citing “monstrous frauds and irregularities,” however, the opposition rejected the results of the election (*Marchés Tropicaux et Méditerranéens*, “Congo,” 21 May 1993: 1321).

At this point, Congo’s notorious militia groups began to make their first appearance on the scene.⁶ A group loyal to Kolélas, the Ninjas, took control over the Brazzaville neighborhoods of Bacongo and Makélékélé, those largely populated by the Lari people who looked upon Kolélas as their leader. This militia began to purge the neighborhoods of residents from the regions of Niari, Bouenza, and Lékoumou (Nibolek), those that had overwhelmingly supported Lissouba in the elections. Meanwhile, Lissouba’s own militia, the Zoulous, began to purge their own neighborhoods (Diata and Mfilou) of Lari residents. When the second round of voting was held on 6 June, the opposition boycotted. In the aftermath of these elections—later struck down by the Supreme Court—the fighting between Kolélas’s Ninjas and the government forces reached the point of civil war. Meanwhile, cooler heads organized mediation efforts led by neutral Congolese political figures, international diplomats, and Gabonese president Omar Bongo throughout the months of June and July. On 4 August 1993, these efforts reached fruition in the Libreville Accords, an agreement that arranged for the arbitration of the disputed seats by an international jury and specified procedures for the rerun of elections to fill the contested seats (Zartman and Vogeli 2000: 273–276).

In October, the elections for the remaining eleven seats were again contested, sparking another round of violence. When the election results confirmed Lissouba’s majority in the Assembly, the opposition groups boy-

cotted the opening of the new Assembly session, leading to a renewal of fighting. The carnage was worse this time, with incredible violence aimed at the representatives of rival ethnoregional constituencies. The worst of the killing took place between November 1993 and January 1994, at which point Lissouba ordered the shelling of Bacongo and Makélékélé. During both of these rounds of fighting, Sassou and his Cobra militia mostly stayed on the sidelines.

This time it was entirely the Congolese themselves who restored the peace, chiefly through an interregional committee in the Assembly, composed of deputies from the two warring sides (Zartman and Vogeli 2000: 278). By 31 January the basic accord was in place, and peace returned gradually to the country, though marked with periodic outbreaks of fighting. In January 1995, a new agreement was reached between Lissouba and Kolélas in which the latter's MCDDI gained cabinet posts, including the Interior Ministry, in a new government. Relative peace prevailed in Congo from the middle of 1994 through the first months of 1997, at which time the start of the next presidential election campaign got under way.

Sadly for Congo, the country's fragile civil peace—and democratic experiment—was destroyed soon after the 1997 presidential election campaign began. The peace was first broken in the northern region of Cuvette, whence hailed both Sassou and Joachim Yhombi-Opango, another former president (1977–1979). The latter had joined the Lissouba government as prime minister in 1993, at the height of the first electoral standoff. In early May 1997, when Sassou sought to be carried into Yhombi's hometown of Owando on a traditional chief's chair, violence broke out between Yhombi's (mostly Kouyou) supporters and Sassou's (mostly Mbochi) bodyguards. A bout of fighting between the supporters of Yhombi and Sassou in the towns of Oyo and Owando ensued, leaving twelve persons dead (*Le Semaine Africaine*, "Une douzaine de tués et des sinistrés," 29 May 1997: 1, 3; Pourtier 1998: 18). Before the fighting went too far, however, outside mediators again intervened. In this instance, UNESCO Director-General Federico Mayor persuaded the feuding politicians to sign a pledge on 31 May 1997 to refrain from any further violence during the campaign.

Although the partisans of peace in Congo breathed a sigh of relief, their hopes were soon dashed. Two days after the signature of this new agreement, four members of Yhombi's bodyguard were killed while trying to pass through a roadblock near Oyo, Sassou's hometown (Pourtier 1998: 18). In the early morning of 5 June 1997, government forces surrounded Sassou's residence in Mpila, apparently with the mission of arresting two of Sassou's associates implicated in the Oyo incident and of seizing the arms of the Cobras.⁷ As Sassou's Cobras had already organized the residence as a virtual armed camp, however, the arrests could not be effected, and fighting erupted once again. The struggle soon spread to the surround-

ing neighborhoods, and eventually to all of Brazzaville. What followed was a four-month-long civil war between the well-armed militia of Sassou and the militias and army forces loyal to Lissouba. Many elements of the regular army either joined forces with Sassou's fighters or simply abandoned their posts. Kolélas and his militia remained neutral until Lissouba persuaded him to join his government in September. Before his forces could have any impact on the stalemate, however, the Angolan army made a decisive intervention. In apparent revenge for Lissouba's embrace of the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (Mabeko-Tali 2000), Angola sent thousands of its troops into Congo on behalf of Sassou, allowing him to seize the country's key installations in October.

With Sassou's return to power through force of arms, Congo's experiment with a democratic system was suspended. The senior members of the previous government (including Lissouba and Kolélas) fled into exile, and were later accused of "genocide" by the Sassou regime. Several were later tried and convicted in absentia. Since 1997, the country has seen two more rounds of civil war, the deadliest taking place between December 1998 and November 1999. The second broke out in the Pool region shortly after the deeply flawed elections of 2002 and continued in sporadic fashion for more than a year. See further discussion in Chapter 10.

■ The Research Question

Having briefly reviewed some details of the case, let us specify the question that is being posed in this study: what accounts for the failure of the democratic experiment? Two concepts in the question require further explanation, namely, "democratic experiment" and "failure." Why was the cumbersome phrase "democratic experiment" chosen rather than the simpler term "democracy" (a shorthand that I use for "democratic experiment" elsewhere in this study)? The answer is that the Congolese democratic experiment had not been "consolidated" before its collapse in 1997, although a transition *had* taken place in 1992. This reply, in turn, compels us to consider more fully the meaning of the terms "transition," "consolidation," and—most problematic of all—"democracy" itself.

Fortunately, this study does not require a deep foray into the minefield of the meaning of the term "democracy." It is enough to specify that in this study the term "democracy" refers to the limited, formal definition of the concept. One scholar (Plattner 1998) has labeled this form of the concept "liberal democracy," to distinguish it from other, broader varieties of democratic rule, such as "constitutional democracy" or "social democracy" (also see Ottemoeller 1999). To distinguish narrowly between formal democracies and other types of regimes, one may usefully follow Przeworski et al. (2000: 14–20). These scholars begin by proclaiming that (formal) democra-

cy is “a regime in which those who govern are elected through contested elections” (15); they go on to specify that both the executive and the legislature must be elected, and that multiple parties must legally contest the elections (18–20).⁸ They logically stipulate that the executive may be indirectly elected, so as not to exclude parliamentary regimes (19).

After extended consideration, Przeworski et al. add one further criterion for a formal democracy to exist: alternation (2000: 27). If a constitutionally *new* regime is in power, but the ruling party has not lost an election, one cannot know whether or not that regime would cede power were it to lose an election. These authors cite empirical evidence to show, however, that in most cases new regimes that control a large percentage of the legislature do *not* in fact experience peaceful, electoral alternation. Accordingly, they decide not to code regimes that have not experienced alternation as “democracies” for purposes of their study. To illustrate the kinds of cases they have in mind, they cite Botswana. This state has had regular, relatively fair elections for both the executive and legislature in which multiple parties competed. Does Botswana thus deserve to be called a democracy? For Przeworski et al., it does not, because the same party (the Botswana Democratic Party [BDP]) has prevailed in each postindependence election and the regime has therefore not experienced alternation. According to the operational rules of these authors, then, Botswana is coded as a nondemocracy, though one might fairly consider it an unconsolidated proto-democratic regime. Przeworski et al. acknowledged that Botswana is neither fish nor fowl, but decided to err on the side of conservatism by excluding such regimes from the list of democracies on the ground they historically do *not* tend to consolidate democratic governments.

This discussion is useful when we consider the case of Congo, for the Lissouba regime falls into the same category as the BDP regime in Botswana. Lissouba’s presidency clearly was the result of a “democratic transition,” as defined by Bratton and van de Walle (1997), and was recorded as such in their study of democratic transitions. Both Lissouba himself and the Congolese legislature certainly came to power by virtue of free and fair elections contested by multiple candidates and parties. The regime was never consolidated, however, by alternation of a new party into the governing role. Following these definitions, I have chosen to refer to the 1992 to 1997 period in Congo as one of “democratic experiment.” The collapse of the experiment in 1997 was not a case of “democratic breakdown,” as referred to by Linz (1978), because no democratic regime had yet been consolidated. Rather, it was a regime that resulted from democratic transition, but was not yet a consolidated democracy.

The other term in need of specification in the research question posed here is “failure.” In the case of Congo, the use of the term is uncontroversial because the collapse of the democratic experiment was accompanied by

a much larger breakdown in civil order. The second regime of Sassou (II), which came to power in October 1997, did so by force of arms rather than by election. Likewise, the legislature that Sassou put in place in January 1998 was appointed, not elected. Most would agree that the 2002 elections in Congo were so manipulated that they do not represent a return to democratic experimentation, but, in any case, these took place under a new constitution. Even if the collapse of the democratic experiment had been less dramatic, any breakdown in the constitutional change of power by free multiparty elections should be considered a failure of a democratic experiment, or a breakdown of a democratic regime. Such failures obviously do not exclude the launching of new democratic experiments or the eventual emergence of new democratic regimes.

Many studies of democratization find it useful to admit a third category of political regime, besides democracies and nondemocracies, namely the intermediate category of “quasi-democracies” or “semi-democracies.” In the African setting, such terms have been used to describe the Abdou Diouf regime in Senegal (Vengroff and Creevey 1997) and the Henri Konan Bédié regime in Côte d’Ivoire (Mundt 1997). Such regimes are characterized by the legal existence of multiple parties and by the regular holding of elections, but also by serious irregularities in those elections or in other social controls that keep a dominant party in power. Some of these regimes have recently been called “electoral authoritarian” regimes (see Chapter 10). Such was the case with Mexico, in the era when the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) dominated the political scene, and in India before the Congress Party opened the political space sufficiently to allow other parties to take power. Such systems often give essentially authoritarian regimes a cover of democratic legitimacy, and sometimes a genuine mandate of popular support. In post-Cold War Africa, such regimes have become commonplace. For the postdemocratic experiment regime in Congo, “electoral authoritarian” is a better label than “semi-democracy” by far.

■ Why the Failure of Formal Democracy Matters

It is fair to ask whether the consolidation of (formal) democracy in Congo would really matter to the country’s inhabitants. Many categories of observers think not, and if they are right, the analysis of its failure would not matter much either. The critics range from those who think that formal democracy does not go far enough, to those who believe it is irrelevant, to those who actively oppose it on grounds of its impracticality. Indeed, since the outcomes of failed democratic experiments seem to include civil war accompanied by mass killing, there is good reason to be cautious about advocating such experiments. The critics are unlikely to be convinced by the brief rejoinders that are offered here, but the case should be made that

the consolidation of formal democracy would matter to the Congolese. If it does matter to them, Congolese and others ought to care about why the experiment failed. In any case, the Congolese are likely to try again to introduce formal democracy into their country, in which case the lessons of the past will be important.

One argument against the interest in formal democracy for African states is that it does not go far enough. As I have argued elsewhere, democratic systems that were limited in certain ways, but that meet the definition used here, would have the best chance of survival in Africa (Clark 1994a). Some scholars, particularly those on the left, have explicitly rejected this view, however (Longman 1998: 77; Fatton 1992). Like-minded thinkers have instead often called for social democracy or “popular democracy” (Saul 1997; also see Mengisteab and Daddieh 1999). Such “deeper” varieties of democracy would charge the state with both meeting people’s fundamental economic needs, without which political participation is (putatively) not possible, and empowering them with the “positive liberty” that allows their participation to be meaningful.⁹ After all, these critics implicitly argue, what meaningful political choices can hungry peasants or illiterate workers make?

Three important things may be said in reply. First, social democracy is simply not an option for Congo now, and even less so for poorer African states. The most Congo can reasonably aspire to in the short term is the kind of formal democracy defined above. Desirable though the satisfaction of socioeconomic needs is, this could not be accomplished without the huge, wholesale commitment of the international community, a commitment that is hardly in the cards. Likewise, the redistribution of existing wealth within in a country like Congo would not go far toward the goal of fulfilling social and economic needs. Second, the establishment of formal democracy in no way precludes the subsequent emergence of a welfare state, if and when the economy and society ever gain the capacity to support such a state. Indeed, this is a laudable goal for the future. Third, Saul (1997), at least, has great difficulty giving concrete meaning to the vague phrase “popular democracy.” For many on the left, popular democracy has been a euphemism for dictatorship in the name of the oppressed. But Congo Republic endured twenty years as a “popular republic” during which time the Congolese enjoyed neither the negative liberty of formal democracy nor the positive liberty promised by popular democracy.

Another argument against formal democracy is that it would make no difference, that it would be irrelevant, because current global economic forces dictate all significant policies to African states.¹⁰ Such authors as Mkandawire (1999) and Ould-Mey (1998: 51–54) have specifically argued that the ubiquity of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in Africa makes the formal democratization of African states meaningless. (Many analysts

of globalization now make similar claims.) These authors argue that the internal policies that really matter are economic policies; these, in turn, *must* be reformed along liberal lines because structural adjustment (and now, more generally, globalization) requires it. Thus, regardless of whether a state is formally democratic, the policies that matter will be the same.

Although it is true that the scope of economic action for African states is severely circumscribed by their limited economic means, such arguments should not be accepted as the last word. Sincere though such arguments may be, they underestimate the choices that African leaders have.¹¹ For African state leaders, the dimension of economic crisis that matters in this context is the possibility of not being able to meet debt obligations. These are the economic circumstances that force state leaders to confront the conditionalities associated with debt relief. In such situations, state rulers have at least three options, each of which has been exercised from time to time. First, they can agree to such programs and then attempt to implement them as Ghana and Uganda have done. Second, they can agree to the SAPs in principle, and then proceed to negotiate them in every detail, seek extensions on the grounds of economic and political crisis, and otherwise delay implementation of real (and painful) reforms. A great many African states, including Zambia, Congo, and many others have followed this course (Van de Walle 2001). Third, they can opt simply to default on their debts. In this case, however, they would become even more disconnected from the world economy and also suffer a loss of future aid and access to credit. Among the states that have opted not to participate in the programs of the international financial institutions (IFIs) at one time or another are Angola, the DRC, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. Those interested in formal democracy implicitly argue that, in a time when many African states face tough choices such as these, state leaders should be more accountable to their citizens, not less. African political parties should be debating such issues and taking positions on them, so that African citizens can have an impact on such state choices.

Still other scholars stress, through the focus of their research, the need for democratic practices among local populations in a decentralized state (Crook and Manor 1998). Nothing in such projects inherently contradicts the limited goal of formal democracy, and, indeed, the rooting of democratic ideals in local and peripheral areas can be quite complementary to formal democracy. At the same time, successful formal democracy mostly depends on the commitment of elites to play by the (democratic) rules of the game. Even in the long-established democracies of the West, substantial minorities of citizens maintain essentially undemocratic attitudes. This is evident in the large percentage of votes often gained by quasi-fascist or communist parties in many European countries.

In the African context, scholars such as Schaffer (1998) suggest that formal democracy cannot possibly work because the bulk of the population

of many African states (Senegal, in this case) does not have democratic values. Schaffer demonstrates that when Senegalese citizens use the French word *démocratie*, or the Wolof word *demokaraasi*, they often have in mind social realities that are quite different from those evoked by cognate words in the minds of Europeans or Americans. Fortunately for the West, the successful practice of democracy does not require all citizens to have a deep appreciation for the liberal roots and meanings of the concept. Likewise, in Senegal, the country's recent political trajectory suggests that formal democracy may be able to proceed even when sizable swaths of the population miscomprehend its intentions or smaller groups actively oppose it. This study ultimately finds, with Schaffer, that undemocratic values are central to understanding democratic failure in Congo, but it neither assumes nor concludes that such values *determined* the trajectory of the experiment.

Those who value formal democracy must admit that it does not ensure every political value that a liberal-minded person might desire. Indeed, in the United States, formal democracy existed side by side with social and racial oppression for generations. This fact begs two other questions, however. First, was the long denial of the civil and political rights of US citizens a product of formal democracy or, rather, a set of social ills that existed *despite* it? Although a nondemocratic social revolution might have corrected such monstrous social injustices much sooner, likely it would have been accompanied by massive civil war with an unforeseeable outcome. In many such social revolutions, the original injustices have gone uncorrected while additional social and political prices have been paid. Second, would a much earlier extension of civil rights in the United States have been incompatible with the continuation of formal democracy? The experience of the 1960s suggests not. On the contrary, that experience suggests that once the social values of the population had evolved to a point of respect for civil rights across racial lines, the democratic system could serve to extend those rights.

Hence, we arrive at the importance of formal democracy. First, it is a morally sound and potentially stable way of communicating social needs and aspirations from a state's people to their government. Although no such system is even close to perfect in this regard, none other, to paraphrase Churchill, seems to work better. Second, and as important, formal democracy is fully compatible with, and generally supports, the extension of deeper social rights and privileges to the population. In many cases the establishment of formal democratic systems in former authoritarian polities has led to an immediate improvement in the enjoyment of civil and political rights. Even the extension of social and economic rights can be a logical outcome of formal democratization, as the cases of Portugal and Spain suggest.

Still other arguments suggest that the establishment of formal democracy should be actively opposed. Some are not opposed to the practice of

formal democracy in the abstract, but suggest (implicitly or explicitly) that the establishment of formal democracy *in African states* is currently impossible. Important preconditions must exist before democracy can be established, and any premature attempt to establish democracy of any kind is likely to have dire consequences.

One such argument entails the prediction of severe conflict between ethnic, regional, and other identity communities. Indeed, few can have failed to notice that liberalization around the world has often been accompanied by nationalist or ethnic violence, and scholars have certainly taken notice (e.g., notably, Snyder 2000). In Africa, Congo, Zaire, and Rwanda all experienced little if any violent conflict among ethnoregional or identity communities during the 1980s, when all three states were forthrightly authoritarian. In the early 1990s, all three were launched on the path of political reform, and all three experienced significant outbreaks of intercommunal violence.¹² Researchers studying other African states have expressed the fear that political liberalization may lead to intercommunal violence and social breakdown (Azevedo 1999; Ottaway 1999). Both at the level of case study and at the broader continental level, other analysts suggest that intercommunal bloodshed and state decay is not a necessary outcome of liberalization. Writing of Rwanda, Longman argues that excessive state strength, rather than state weakness, was the true cause of the 1994 genocide (1998: 77). Having carried out a systematic study of forty-seven sub-Saharan African states, however, Smith rejects the hypothesis that gains in civil liberties lead to increases in ethnic tensions. In fact, his study “has provided some compelling evidence that just the opposite is the case” (e.g., Senegal, Ghana, and Zambia) (2000: 34). While Smith’s study hardly resolves this issue, it at least challenges the claim that liberalization leads inevitably to intercommunal violence.

As indicated here, one of the main reasons that premature democratization efforts are thought unwise is that they may lead to state breakdown or collapse. Many of the African states analyzed in the edited work of Zartman (1995), including Somalia, Zaire, and Angola, all began to experience an acceleration of state decay after they began a process of liberalization in the early 1990s. Huntington (1968) had already made an early and powerful statement that state capacity and stability mattered more than the mode of rule. Country studies of African states followed this important work by analyzing the modes of the extension of state power into the peripheral regions of state territory (e.g., Callaghy 1984). More recently, Reno (1998) has shown that one of the consequences of deteriorating state capacities may be “warlord politics,” or a form of power seeking aimed not at increasing bureaucratic capacity, but at realizing short-term economic gains without state reconstruction. In turn, the practice of warlord politics further accelerates the process of the deterioration of state power, often to the point of state

collapse. With dynamics such as these in mind, a seasoned and capable scholar of African politics, Jeffrey Herbst, has recently turned his attention to the structural prerequisites of state control and authority (2000). Herbst's study, in contrast to Longman, implicitly assumes that effective state control over territory is the prerequisite for other forms of social progress. The importance of his work lies in demonstrating the link between effective state control and the demographics of the national territories.

Given this compelling imperative of the need for state control, should one be interested in the processes of democratization in Congo? The answer is yes, for two reasons. First, the Congolese state only lost effective control over the national territory for a brief period during the 1997 civil war. Since then, the state has periodically lost control over portions of the country, but its authority has been rapidly reasserted. Thus, basic control over the national territory has rarely been an issue in Congo, as it chronically has been in African states such as Angola, the DRC, Liberia, the Sudan, and Somalia. That the Congolese state's capacities are meager is incontestable, given its limited legitimacy and financial resources, but this does not mean that it has ever completely collapsed.¹³ Moreover, basic civil order and state authority have now been reestablished. Second, a large contingent of Congolese have not given up on the idea of multiparty politics in their country. Even President Sassou pays lip service to the idea and allows legal political competition under the constitution adopted in 2002. Thus, if we accept the arguments that democratization may stimulate ethnic conflict or state disintegration, the reasons for studying the previous democratization effort are even more compelling. Perhaps the lessons of the past will be a guide to the future return of real democracy to Congo.

What all of these related bodies of literature show is that both economic development and political development are connected to democracy and democratization efforts. In this light, whether or not one thinks formal democracy would be good for the Congolese, the issue is important. The Congolese will certainly face the prospect of democratic experimentation in the future. When they do, their success or failure will have important implications for the extension of state power into new domains of social life, for economic development, for the expansion or contraction of human rights, and for civil peace among Congo's multiple communal constituencies.

■ Organization of the Study

Chapter 2 sets out the main epistemological challenge of this study, namely, to explore the extent to which the failure of democracy in Congo can be *explained*, in the narrow sense, and to what extent it can be *understood*. In the most direct sense, a specific act by one of the principals in the Congolese drama ended the democratic experiment. When President Lissouba dispatched troops to Sassou's residence in Mpila on the morning

of 5 June 1997, a series of events was set in motion that destroyed any hope of a continuation of the democratic experiment then in place. This reality became clear later, following other events that made a return to civilian rule under the existing constitution impossible.

Of course, no serious historian or policymaker—much less social scientist—would possibly be satisfied with this answer alone. Our curiosity demands that we know about the structural circumstances of Lissouba's decision: What conditions may have forced, or at least prompted, him to act as he did? What was the larger context in which he acted? What historical forces made his action unsurprising in some way, if not predictable? In short, what structural conditions created the web of significance in which the Congolese president acted? Such questions point us to the existence of a dialectical interaction of agents and structures that perpetually give rise to new social contexts. Chapter 2 is devoted to laying out this agent-structure dialectic as a way of understanding the trajectory of democratic experiments. It presents the hypothesis that, despite all of the structural constraints on his action, Lissouba could have chosen a different course on 5 June 1997. In turn, had he chosen differently, there is some possibility that democracy might have been consolidated in Congo. If agency does indeed matter, and there was scope for agency in the Congolese experiment, then the goal of explaining the outcome, as opposed to understanding it, is in question. Chapter 2 ends with a discussion of the value of comparative analysis.

Chapter 3 begins a series including five others that serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, each presents an alternative hypothesis to the one just stated. These alternative hypotheses come in a variety of forms, but all point to the structural features of Congo's internal society or international position that put constraints on the behavior of Congo's posttransition leaders. All suggest that the trajectory of Congo's democratic experiment was largely predetermined. On the other hand, each of these six chapters helps us to understand the context within which Lissouba and other Congolese leaders acted. They aid us in understanding the varying degrees to which each was constrained, or was forced to act in specific ways, by the structural context in which they operated. Chapter 3 presents an overview of Congo's postcolonial institutions and culture, culled from the country's late-colonial and postcolonial culture. An undemocratic political culture is often blamed for the failure of democratic experiments, while the pretransition institutions are also thought to exert a determining influence. This chapter also provides important historical background to the study.

Chapter 4 focuses on several aspects of the Congolese economy and their impact on the course of the democratic experiment. The chapter establishes the rentier nature of the Congolese economy and the resulting economic class divisions in the society. It further takes notice of the structural adjustment programs that have been introduced into the country and their

impact on tolerance among the Congolese population. In essence, this chapter examines the contention of many scholars that structural economic adjustment and simultaneous democratic consolidation are not possible. It also asks whether the class structure of Congo made successful democratization impossible, specifically, whether or not the presence of a large urban lumpen proletariat in the country fueled the rise of the militia groups that eventually tore the country apart.

Chapter 5 explores the constraints, arising from the country's ethnic and regional cleavages, that hindered democratic consolidation. The political entities that emerged in posttransition Congo primarily spoke for and answered to ethnic and regional constituencies rather than ideological or class constituencies. The alternative hypothesis is that Congo's democratic experiment was doomed from the start by these deep identity conflicts. The chapter explores some of the following questions: Was this outcome inevitable, or did it merely reflect the choices made by the political class? If it was inevitable, did the practice of ethnoregional politics make the consolidation of democracy impossible? In what ways did ethnoregional politics constrain the behavior of political agents?

Chapter 6 studies the closely related question of the Congolese army and militia groups. The Congolese army that President Lissouba inherited in 1992, and particularly its officer corps, was thoroughly dominated by northern elements. Some percentage of these officers no doubt resented the fact that they had become answerable to a civilian president and, worse still, one from the south. Likewise, the same officers no doubt looked forward to the return of a northerner, like Lissouba's three predecessors, to the presidency. The behavior of the army during the civil war of 1993–1994 showed that it was indeed not entirely at the command of President Lissouba. Perhaps the rise of the militia groups, then, was inevitable given the structural relationship of the army to the state.

Chapter 7 turns to the nature of the transition itself and to the institutional design of the new regime. There is *prima facie* evidence that Congo's poorly chosen posttransition constitution may have doomed the experiment from the start. Did the possibility of president and prime minister issuing from different political families make conflict and democratic failure inevitable? Did the nature of the transition make the shape and character of the constitution inevitable? This chapter explores these questions with a focus on the nature of the constitution and Congo's constitutional crisis in late 1992.

Chapter 8 considers the impact of Congo's relations with other states on the outcome of the democratic experiment. Since independence, Congo has had an intensive and close relationship with France, even in the days of the Marxist experiment. Although most have referred to such relationships as neocolonial, in the case of France and Congo they are more appropriately termed interstate patron-client relations. The Franco-Congolese relationship

became rocky during the period of the democratic experiment. Many observers, especially exiled Congolese observers, have been keen to put the blame on France for many of Congo's problems, including the failure of the democratic experiment. In the end, a foreign power other than France was directly responsible for ending the Congolese civil war of 1997: Angola. Was this intervention ultimately to blame for the democratic failure in Congo?

Chapter 9 returns to the problem of agency in the democratic failure, again taking up the epistemological question. While Chapters 3 through 8 make abundant reference to the role of agency, this chapter identifies several specific decisions of Congolese leaders that either kept the democratic experience going, caused it harm without destroying it, or ultimately caused it to fail. In each case, the weight of the structural constraints and pressures on the decisionmaker is closely examined. In turn, this chapter evaluates the impact of each decision on the reshaping of structural circumstances that provided a context for future action. It suggests that Congolese leaders always had some scope for choice, though the range of choices available tended to close tighter and tighter over time. The path dependency of the democratic experiment created by the earlier choices is also evident; choices that were made late in the democratic experiment were conditioned not only by the structural forces that existed in 1992, but also by new structural realities that were created by earlier choices. This chapter also suggests that political culture is the one structural feature under which many other causes of the democratic failure can be subsumed. Political culture is thus at the center of a "thick description" of the failure of the experiment.¹⁴

In order to understand more fully the meaning of the Congolese experiment for the future, Chapter 10 presents an overview of politics in Congo since Sassou's "second coming." The review of his record shows that President Sassou slowly prepared the country for a return to constitutional rule in a manner that assured the outcome of the 2002 elections. Sassou's course after 1997 was to establish an electoral autocracy that allowed for multiparty elections without jeopardizing his personal rule. The elections gave a facade of legitimacy to his regime. This chapter also shows that Sassou's behavior in the 2002–2006 period, when he was securely in power, reinforced the undemocratic aspects of Congolese political culture. Congo's post-1997 politics show that the country has not yet overcome its deeply antidemocratic history and culture. They also show that the country's recent leaders have done little to alter that culture and thus to open a genuinely new chapter in Congo's political history.

■ Notes

1. The "Congo" analyzed in this study is the state officially named the Republic of Congo, but it most typically goes by the names Congo-Brazzaville or Congo Republic. It is to be distinguished from the former Belgian Congo across the

Congo River, whose official name is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Democratic Republic of Congo, called Zaire from 1971 to 1997, is often referred to simply as the DRC or, now less commonly, Congo-Kinshasa. In this study, “Congo” refers to the Republic of Congo, while its larger neighbor is referred to as the DRC.

2. Denis Sassou-Nguesso’s first presidency (1979–1991) is now often referred to as “Sassou I.” His second period of rule, which began in 1997, is referred to as “Sassou II.”

3. For translations of the names of parties in this volume, see the list of acronyms.

4. The coalition actually went under the name Union pour le Renouveau Démocratique–Parti Congolais du Travail (URD-PCT). The URD was an umbrella organization that included the MCDDI as its most important constituent party.

5. By this time, Lissouba’s coalition had expanded to include several other smaller parties and had been renamed Mouvance Présidentielle (Presidential Domaine).

6. On militia groups in the 1993–1994 war, see Bazenguissa-Ganga (1994) and Chapter 6 of this volume.

7. For a short overview of the start of the war, see Clark (1998); for a more detailed account, Pourtier (1998). The actual intentions of those who went to Sassou’s residence on that day are disputed. The controversy is discussed at more length in Chapter 6 of this volume.

8. Przeworski et al. seem to have neglected to stipulate that universal suffrage is a criterion of their operational definition of democracy, but their discussion appears to assume it.

9. The language of “positive” and “negative” liberty comes from Berlin (1969).

10. The label “irrelevant” is given by Ake (1998), cited in Van de Walle (1999: 96).

11. In fact, all states in the international system, even the most powerful, face limits on the scope of action that they may choose to take. Sometimes these can be quite severe, even for great powers—France in 1939 comes to mind.

12. On Congo, see Clark (1997a); on Zaire, see Clark (1995); on Rwanda, Longman (1997, 1998).

13. Even at the height of the 1997 war, life was continuing fairly normally in some of the country’s secondary cities, including Pointe Noire, and even in some suburbs of Brazzaville for most of the war.

14. “Thick description” is, of course, a phrase coined by Clifford Geertz (1973). Its meaning here is somewhat different, but the allusion is intended and meaningful.