The Congo: Unanswered questions surround Kabila's assassination

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Thirty days of official mourning began in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) following the burial on Wednesday of the country's assassinated president, Laurent Kabila. The presidency was assumed almost immediately by his son Joseph, previously head of the armed forces, in what the ruling clique in Kinshasa has termed an “interim government”.

The real circumstances of President Kabila's death and who was responsible are still murky questions, with several conflicting explanations being circulated.

In his latest account of the assassination on January 16, Emile Mota, Kabila's Economics Minister, claims he was the only person present besides Kabila and his assailant, who was one of the President's bodyguards.

Mota rejects versions of the assassination events circulated by Western diplomats, which suggested it took place in front of top generals after a row about the recent setbacks in the war against Ugandan and Rwandan-backed rebel forces. Some accounts had even suggested that one of the top generals had shot Kabila. Mota also denied there had been any other shooting, despite reports from foreign diplomats that gunfire could be heard for about 30 minutes.

Several accounts support Mota's claim that the killing “was a premeditated attack that had been planned for some time”. However, the rest of his statement raises serious doubts. Why should various foreign diplomats have all given misleading accounts?

Since the assassin was immediately chased and shot dead, and so cannot be questioned, Mota's denial that anyone else was involved would seem designed to divert attention away from the inner circle around Kabila. But even if they were not present at the killing-and his son Joseph was conveniently absent in Katanga—the involvement of elements within the ruling clique would seem highly likely, given the dissatisfaction with Kabila's handling of the war. Angola, which is giving military support to the DRC along with Namibia and Zimbabwe, had recently been looking for a resolution of the conflict, and is known to be close to some of the top military.

Such a well-planned surgical operation to remove Kabila makes it unlikely that Rwandan or Ugandan forces were directly involved in the assassination. Since these opponents of his regime would be more likely to taker much wider action, such as a coup, which would have involved seizure of the television station and other strategic sites, and Kinshasa was reported calm throughout and after the event.

Belgian sources state that the assassin was Kasereka Rachidi (given variously in some reports as Rashidi or Rafiri), who is said to be from North Kivu province in the east of the Congo and which is now under rebel control. He is said to have belonged to Kabila's army since 1997, when it was formed.

DRC military leaders originating from this province are said to have been purged and possibly executed in recent months, following defeats at the hands of the rebels. Kabila cronies from Katanga replaced them. The Kabila regime lacked any countrywide base of support, being comprised almost exclusively of people who shared his own Katangan background, mainly relatives. According to a Belgian report, an aggrieved group from North Kivu was behind the assassination. It was apparently a statement claiming responsibility for the killing by this group, called “the young militants of the National Council for Resistance and Democracy (NCRD),” that was sent to the French AFP news agency in Paris.

However, there are problems with this explanation. Since the whole leadership of the army, including Joseph Kabila, were responsible for the purges, why just target the President?

The involvement of Western powers in the assassination is another possibility. Many African leaders indulge in a rhetorical denunciation of “imperialism” to divert attention away from their own involvement in the export of their country's wealth to the West, and Kabila was no exception. But the DRC leader had upset his US backers, who had brought him to power with military backing from Uganda and Rwanda, by reneging on deals to sell off mining concessions as well as by refusing to accept IMF proposals

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to pay off the country's huge debts incurred under Mobutu. After breaking with Uganda and Rwanda in 1998 Kabila gained the backing of Angola and Zimbabwe who wanted to extend their regional power. Another major factor in their support was the lucrative business deals concluded with Kabila, including an attempt to sell off Congo's diamond producing complex to an Israeli firm, and trying to float a copper and cobalt mining operation on the London Stock exchange.

The Lusaka peace deal negotiated in the summer of 1999 was carried through after the US put considerable pressure on all the major combatants in the Congo war. At the beginning of this year, a special meeting of the United Nations Security Council accepted a US resolution for the Lusaka deal to be revitalised. Under this, UN observers were eventually to be joined by a "peacekeeping" force and moves towards "Inter-Congolese dialogue" begun between the warring parties. The then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright insisted on the territorial integrity of the Congo, demanding that all the outside countries involved withdraw so that a settlement could be agreed to restore stability to the region.

Uganda and Rwanda, who receive military aid from the US as well as IMF loans, were told that they had to pull out. Whilst they officially agreed to do so, their armies continued operating inside the Congo, especially in the gold and diamond mining areas. This led to clashes this year in Kisangani, in which hundreds of civilians were killed.

Zimbabwe, with its president Robert Mugabe increasingly under attack from Britain and the United States, was refused IMF support because of allegedly high government spending; much of it going on the war in the Congo. Zimbabwe's military top brass has done well from looting operations although Harare has failed to gain much from the Congo mines. The Zimbabwean economy is now near collapse, but so far Mugabe has maintained support for the DRC regime, whilst formerly accepting the Lusaka accord. Angola, whose soldiers are responsible for the defence of Kinshasa, also indicated support for Lusaka, but continued its commitment to the war, because the DRC had become a base for UNITA rebels, with whom they have been engaged in a civil war since the 1970s.

In spite of the fact that all these regional powers continued the fighting over the last 18 months, the approach of the US and Britain has been increasingly to blame the continuation of the war on the personal foibles of Kabila. An analyst from the London-based *Economist Intelligence Unit* is quoted saying "The only obstruction had been Kabila because the [Lusaka] accord called for the government's democratic transition and that was a threat to his power." The *Washington Post* favourably contrasted Joseph Kabila—Western educated and English-speaking—with his father. Here was someone who made diplomats "hope that things have changed", whereas "Laurent Kabila stood as the major impediment to a peaceful settlement of the war launched in August 1998 to unseat him." The Lusaka peace deal "remained unfulfilled largely because he kept staging new offensives while blocking deployment of U.N. peacekeepers in government-held territory."

Such claims that Kabila has been the main obstacle to implementing the Lusaka accord would add weight to the view that Western intelligence played a role in his demise. Precisely what that role could be is unlikely to emerge from official sources for some time. It has taken 40 years for the truth to be established about the killing of Patrice Lumumba, the first post-independence leader of the Congo: evidence now points to Belgian agents having killed him, but the governments of the US and Britain were also planning to murder him.

In the immediate aftermath of the assassination, Angola and Zimbabwe have strengthened their presence in the Congo. Angolan troops were highly visible at Kabila's funeral cortege in Kinshasa. Uganda and Rwanda indicated that they would not attempt to take any military advantage out of the proceedings. A new round of diplomacy has already begun, with the Angolan, Namibian and Zimbabwean presidents meeting up to pledge their continued support for the DRC regime, but expressing willingness to renew peace negotiations. Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel attended Kabila's funeral and is now visiting the capitals of all the countries involved in the Congo war with a view to initiating the Lusaka accord. In New York, the United Nations announced it would be calling a special meeting in February to facilitate a peace deal.

Even if the major combatants in the war decide on an official rapprochement it will not stop the actual conflict on the ground and will produce no benefit for the people of the Congo. The economy in the DRC is in a state of collapse, with runaway inflation, unpaid wages, and widespread poverty. In the rebel controlled regions the population has been subject to looting by the rebel armies. Hunger and disease are rife, and as well as the civil war fighting between ethnic groups has killed thousands. Numerous militias operate within the region, including the Interhamwe, the remnants of the Hutu regime that carried out the Rwandan genocide.

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