

# Smashing neocolonial rule in Congo-Brazzaville

*A struggle for non-capitalist development, people's democracy, and scientific socialism in Central Africa (1963-1990)*

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## Introduction

For almost three decades, Congo-Brazzaville chartered an unparalleled revolutionary course in Central Africa. After a popular uprising brought down a corrupt comprador regime in 1963, the Congolese national-democratic revolution advanced over the next decades to establish and consolidate the first people's democracy in Africa. The political force driving this process was forced to evolve too, from a pluralist mass party into a Marxist-Leninist vanguard organisation of Congo's working masses. This article traces out the trajectory of the Congolese revolution and examines how socialist states in Eastern Europe and Asia influenced this process. To draw out lessons from this historical experience, the article focuses on three main challenges that confronted Congo's revolutionaries.

First is the issue of state power, which Lenin famously described as "the key question of every revolution". After the popular uprising in 1963, the Congolese people inherited a neocolonial state that had been moulded around the interests of foreign capital. How could it be replaced with an apparatus that would serve the needs of the national-democratic revolution? In the various constitutions adopted by Congo in the 1960s and 1970s, we see a gradual shift away from bourgeois constitutionalism and the recognition that the state is not a neutral institution to mediate between classes but an instrument that must be utilised by certain classes to bring about social change. By the early 1970s, after intense struggles with foes from both within and outside the country, Congolese revolutionaries were able to establish a people's republic and a vanguard party with a scientifically grounded programme. There was a permanent tension between the need to further democratise the political process and the necessities of defending the revolution in an extremely hostile environment. As shown below, the struggle to construct a people's democracy in the African context differed significantly from the experiences of constructing people's democracy in Eastern Europe.

The second question revolved around the divergent strategies for economic development that were formulated within the national-democratic movement. Congo-Brazzaville had been integrated into the capitalist international division of labour as a dependent and exploited component: it was a supplier of raw materials (primarily timber and oil) and an export market for the capitalist powers of Europe and North America. Foreign companies controlled the vast majority of the Congolese economy. How could the revolution be advanced while the country remained under the dominance of foreign capital? This was the central contradiction that plagued Congolese leaders from the very beginning. Behind labels such as "pro-Soviet", "pro-China", and "pro-imperialist", were in fact contrasting conceptions of how the country could best escape colonially imposed underdevelopment and advance towards industrialisation and economic independence. The article identifies three phases in

revolutionaries' strategy: In the 1960s, a softer, national-reformist course was pursued, which was then replaced by a more assertive nationalisation strategy in the 1970s after the People's Republic was founded at the end of 1969. The assassination of President Marien Ngouabi in 1977 brought this phase to an end and, in its final decade, the Congolese revolution pivoted towards a strategy similar to China's "reform and opening-up" approach.

The third question – tied to the second – is the issue of Congo's political ties with the communist world movement and its economic relations with the socialist states in Eastern Europe and Asia. How did the Congolese revolutionaries relate to the socialist world system and vice versa? What was the impact of the Sino-Soviet split? And how did the socialist states seek to assist Congo in breaking free from neocolonialism? As will be argued below, the transfer of technology and knowledge from the socialist states to Congo represented a qualitatively new type of international relations that was based on solidarity and mutual development rather than exploitation and dependency. Nonetheless, the communist world movement was unable to integrate the Congolese economy into an international socialist division of labour, which would have allowed Congo to disengage from the capitalist world market. This proved fatal for the Congolese revolution. The article focuses primarily on relations with the German Democratic Republic (DDR) and its leading party, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), since the relevant archives were the most accessible to us.

The research for this article was based largely on archival work in the German Federal Archives, where thousands of reports by the SED and the Congolese revolutionaries can be found. Particularly insightful were the doctoral theses of Congolese economists and sociologists who studied at the DDR's Academy for Social Sciences in the 1980s. In addition, Marxist and bourgeois histories of Congo have been referenced. All sources can be found in the footnotes alongside any background information. Further reading suggestions can be found in the bibliography.

## The French colonisation of the Congo (1880–1958)

Located north of the Congo River, the territory that today makes up the Republic of Congo was reigned over by several semi-feudal kingdoms prior to the arrival of Europeans. After the mouth of the Congo was reached by the Portuguese in 1484, Europeans began trading commodities and manufactured goods for slaves captured in the hinterlands. The structures of the pre-existing kingdoms rapidly disintegrated as the transatlantic slave trade took off in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Direct European colonisation

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<sup>1</sup> Author collective, *Staatsrecht junger Nationalstaaten*, Staatsverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Berlin, 1988, pg. 259.

began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with France establishing a “protectorate” over the territories north of the Congo River in 1880. The Berlin Conference of 1884/85 confirmed France’s hold over what was named “French Congo”. Overwhelmed with the size of this territory, France divided exploitation rights amongst 40 private companies, which mostly rested on medium-sized merchant capital.<sup>2</sup> Due to the relative weakness of these companies, little technology and material was brought into Congo and the local population was simply subject to forced labour without the means of production being developed. As forests covered roughly 60 percent of the Congolese territory, timber quickly became the colony’s main export.

France’s colonisation of Congo was characterised by a system of direct administration, which – in contrast to Britain’s indirect approach of relying on local ruling classes to rule over many of its colonies – eradicated local structures and replaced them with a hierarchy of French administrators who wielded full political control and imposed a head tax on all local inhabitants to fund the state apparatus.<sup>3</sup> Canton and village chiefs were stripped of their traditional rights and integrated into the lowest level of this hierarchy to serve as the auxiliaries to the colonisers. The Catholic church penetrated deeply into Congolese society and played a key role in upholding colonial rule, especially through its control over education.<sup>4</sup>

In 1908, France organized its colonies into a federation named French Equatorial Africa (FEA). The Congolese city of Brazzaville was designated as the FEA’s capital and became the main administrative and transit hub for the extraction of natural resources from “French Africa”. Through this unique role as the administrative and commercial centre of Central Africa, southern Congo developed into a relatively urbanised region with well-educated and influential petty-bourgeois classes (i.e., bureaucrats and the civil and military intelligentsia).<sup>5</sup> Economic activity centred around the Congo-Ocean Railway, a 500-kilometer-long track built in the 1920s to connect Brazzaville to the port city of Pointe Noire. This line had been constructed with forced labour and cost the lives of over 17,000 locals. After its opening in 1934, the operation and activity around this railway line gave rise to an embryonic working class that largely consisted of transport and dock workers.

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<sup>2</sup> L. Kounkou “Zur Entwicklung des volkswirtschaftlichen Reproduktionsprozesses in der Volksrepublik Kongo“ in *Zur Entwicklung in der Volksrepublik Kongo*, Akademie für Gesellschaftswissenschaften beim Zentralkomitee der SED, Berlin, 1987, pg. 12.

<sup>3</sup> M. M’Pandzou, “Probleme der Umgestaltung des Staatsapparates in der Volksrepublik Kongo“ in *Zur Entwicklung in der Volksrepublik Kongo*, Akademie für Gesellschaftswissenschaften beim Zentralkomitee der SED, Berlin, 1987, pg. 63.

<sup>4</sup> M’Pandzou, pg. 63.

<sup>5</sup> U. Schmidt, „Zu den politisch-ideologischen Grundpositionen der Führungskräfte in der VR Kongo“ in *Asien, Afrika und Lateinamerika*, 1988, iss. 16, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, S.878 and German Federal Archives, file DL 2/10588.



*French colonies in Africa (1935). The territory of Congo Français, which operated as the administrative and merchant hub of French Equatorial Africa (dark purple), would become the Republic of Congo in 1958.*

European colonisation also had a major impact on the process of nation formation in Sub-Saharan Africa. Viewed historically, the nation state crystallised at a specific developmental stage of human society, namely when capitalism supplanted feudalism.<sup>6</sup> During this process, the nation emerged as a stable community of people linked together by common territory, economic life, language, and culture. In Sub-Saharan Africa, capitalist relations had not developed organically, but had been imposed onto societies that (due to centuries of foreign pillage and exploitation) had not yet overcome semi- or even pre-feudal relations. In the late 1800s, the European powers had divided up the continent amongst themselves, without consideration for historical, economic, and ethnic factors. There were some 77 tribes living in Congo by the end of colonial rule, and many were divided by borders to neighbouring states. After winning independence in the mid-twentieth century, African leaders were thus

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<sup>6</sup> V. Y. Chirkin and Y. A. Yudin, *A Socialist-Oriented State: Instrument of Revolutionary Change*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1978, pg. 95.

confronted with significant contradictions in their societies. As Guinean President and revolutionary Sekou Touré remarked: “In post-colonial Africa, the state precedes the nation as a rule.”<sup>7</sup> Tribal identity was thus far more developed than national consciousness. This fact – alongside the colonisers’ decades-old divide and rule policies – sowed the seeds for inter-tribal strife and separatist conflicts following independence. As will be shown below, this reality represented a significant obstacle to the consolidation of the Congolese state apparatus.

## Independence under a comprador regime (1958–1963)

With the advance of the anti-colonial struggle and the weakening of French imperialism after the Second World War, African national liberation movements and the French Communist Party successfully wrestled political concessions out of Paris in the 1950s. Embroiled in a domestic political crisis and recognising that direct colonial rule in Africa was becoming unsustainable, political leadership in France shifted tactics and began granting autonomy to the FEA colonies in 1958. In order to minimise its losses, Paris sought to promote a section of indigenous administrators, army officers, and diplomats who could protect France’s interests after national independence. While this approach failed in those states where ardent anti-imperialists led the national movement (e.g., in Mali or Guinea), France was able to gain significant influence over many other nationalist parties in Africa. In French Congo, for example, the Roman Catholic priest Abbé Fulbert Youlou led a constitutional *coup d’État* to become the first prime minister of the new Republic of Congo in 1958. Youlou’s party, the *Union démocratique de défense des intérêts africains* (UDDIA) was fervently anti-communist and sought to develop the young republic along capitalist lines.

As the Congolese sociologist Melanchthon M’Pandzou argued, Youlou’s government was a classic example of a comprador regime working to preserve the dominance of foreign capital.<sup>8</sup> Numerous agreements were signed with the European Economic Community (EEC) and France to ensure the latter’s continued influence over finances, technology, and education. Treaties co-signed with Chad and the Central African Republic protected France’s military foothold in Central Africa. The justice system was riddled with judges and lawyers educated in France. Youlou agreed to cement colonial-era borders rather than strive for pan-African integration and asserted that a capitalist path would bring about the fastest economic development in the country. He cut capital controls and minimised taxes on foreign companies operating in Congo. The government also showed no interest in constructing a state-owned sector; investments made up only 3.7% of the state budget. The government was content on relegating

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in V. Y. Chirkin and Y. A. Yudin, pg 96.

<sup>8</sup> M’Pandzou, pg. 65.

Congo to the role of a raw material supplier and an export market for the Western powers. Meanwhile, the administrative bureaucracy ballooned: in just three years, the number of personnel doubled. By 1963, almost half the state budget was covering personnel costs.



*Congolese president Fulbert Youlou holding hands with French Minister of Culture André Malraux to celebrate official political independence on 15 August 1960.*

Resistance to Youlou's bloated and corrupt regime grew rapidly in the years after independence. Two groupings were crystallising in the opposition. The first group rallied around scientific socialism and was prevalent within the trade unions and the youth movement. This group advocated strategies of [non-capitalist development](#), which entailed the nationalisation of key industries, the introduction of economic planning, and closer economic ties with the socialist states to gradually eliminate foreign capital from Congo and lay the foundations for socialist construction without having to endure a capitalist stage of development. The second group advocated for a notion of "African socialism", which sought to restore the supposedly communal and classless nature of precolonial African society. M'Pandzou described this tendency as "utopian" as opposed to scientific, as it sought to achieve progress through a mental revolution rather than a rapid advance of the material conditions in Congo.

## The revolution begins (1963–1966)

After just three years in power, Youlou had become so repressive that he had alienated much of his original support base. When in August 1963 he tried to establish absolute personal rule, the unions called for a strike. Youlou immediately had the strike leaders arrested, and massive protests erupted in Brazzaville. Hundreds of workers were killed during an attempt to free the imprisoned unionists. The French army initially

coordinated with Youlou to suppress the uprising, but by 15<sup>th</sup> August the anti-government movement was so overwhelming that France abandoned the regime.<sup>9</sup>

This revolution – which came to be known as the *Trois Glorieuses* – was primarily driven by the unions and youth movement, while progressive elements in the military supported it.<sup>10</sup> It was not clear who would take over in the immediate aftermath, as the opposition was not united behind a political platform. The unions and youth movement were not able to take on the leading role in the new National Council and state power was now controlled by a coalition of national-reformist and revolutionary-democratic figures from the intelligentsia, military, and unions. By December of that year, a new constitution was approved in a popular referendum, marking an important step towards the democratisation of Congolese society. Bourgeois-democratic rights and political structures had now been established in the Republic.<sup>11</sup> The former teacher and minister of education, Alphonse Massamba-Débat, was elected president to replace Youlou.

The unity that had been forged in opposition to Youlou soon broke down as the classes within the alliance began to vie for hegemony. Counterrevolutionary forces – stemming largely from the clergy, the catholic trade union, and the colonial settlers – tried to rally support under the slogan “The August Revolution is better than the previous regime. But the Youlou regime is better than socialism.”<sup>12</sup> Under the leadership of revolutionary intellectuals around Massamba-Débat, the progressive forces united to establish a national-democratic mass party called the *Mouvement national de la révolution* (MNR). At its founding congress in July 1964, the MNR adopted scientific socialism as its ideological foundation and rejected the capitalist path of development for Congo. A youth wing (the *Jeunesse de MNR*) was also created alongside a national trade union confederation (CSC) and a revolutionary women’s organization (URFC). While this reshuffling pushed out many of the pro-French figures from the political landscape, the MNR still represented an anti-imperialist national front in which different classes and various ideological currents coexisted.<sup>13</sup>

The next years were characterised by significant social gains and the construction of a basic state-owned sector. Health centres and schools were built throughout the country, and the Republic soon boasted the highest school enrolment rate in tropical

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<sup>9</sup> After initially being granted asylum in neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, Youlou moved to France and then to Franco’s Spain, where the French government put 500,000 francs at his disposal.

<sup>10</sup> M’Panzou, pg. 72.

<sup>11</sup> Author collective, 1988, pg. 260.

<sup>12</sup> N.W. Pychtunov, „Programmatische Dokumente und Politik der Nationalen Revolutionären Bewegung und der Kongolesischen Partei der Arbeit (Kongo/Brazzaville)“ in *Partei und Staat in den Ländern mit sozialistischer Orientierung*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 1974, pg. 231.

<sup>13</sup> M’Panzou, pg. 74.

Africa.<sup>14</sup> Textile, cement, and timber processing factories were constructed in several cities to promote an import-substitution model of development and reduce the neocolonial dependencies of Congo.<sup>15</sup> Massamba-Débat's government was slow to nationalise foreign-owned companies since there were practically no native technical experts and a serious lack of technology. The colonial system and Youlou's regime had primarily educated clerks for administration, not engineers and technicians. The MNR thus launched mass campaigns to train a generation of technical cadre.

The MNR also turned the country's foreign policy around and established close ties with the socialist bloc. Dozens of Congolese administrators and students were sent to the socialist countries to receive technical and ideological training, while hundreds of Soviet and Chinese specialists taught in Congo.<sup>16</sup> The USA soon suspended diplomatic relations with Brazzaville in 1965, while Cuban troops were invited to help convert Congo's military into a "national people's army".<sup>17</sup> The MNR additionally sheltered Lumumbist rebels from the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, and permitted Angolan militants from the MPLA to use Congolese territory to launch attacks against Portugal's colonial troops.



*1968: Congolese President Massamba-Débat (third from right) meeting Nicolae Ceaușescu (fifth from left), general secretary of the Romanian Communist Party.*

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<sup>14</sup> J. F. Clark, "Congo: Transition and the Struggle to Consolidate", in *Political Reform in Francophone Africa* (1997).

<sup>15</sup> Kounkou, pg. 28.

<sup>16</sup> V. Thompson and R. Adloff, *Historical Dictionary of the People's Republic of the Congo*, Scarecrow Press, Inc., London, 1984, pg. 84.

<sup>17</sup> Pychtunov, pg. 231.

While the MNR government had a clear anti-imperialist character, it was also restrained by its economic dependency on the capitalist West. As the Congolese foreign minister Charles-Davin Ganao explained to a DDR delegation in August 1966, Brazzaville could not risk losing ties to West Germany by taking up official relations with East Germany, for the former was one of Congo's most important trading partners, importing 60 percent of the country's timber exports.<sup>18</sup> The question of recognising the DDR was a main point of contention amongst anti-imperialist forces throughout the continent at the time. It represented much more than just relations with socialist East Germany. As Ganao explained, anti-imperialist forces could take a clear position against the Western-sponsored regimes in Saigon and Seoul, but doing the same against Bonn would risk losing buyers from West Germany and the EEC. It would represent a definitive step beyond non-alignment, towards the socialist bloc, which was not yet in an economic position to replace the West as the main importer of Congolese goods. As such, Congo maintained relations with West Germany "under the compulsion of necessity", not because they "shared a common ideology". Ganao soberly summarised Congo's dilemma to the East German delegation: "The country's economy does not belong to the Congolese state".



*Timber was the Republic's main export until it was supplanted by crude oil in the 1970s.*

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<sup>18</sup> German Federal Archives, file DY 30-98154.

As the revolution advanced, the factions united in the MNR increasingly came into conflict with one another. In late 1964, an offensive was launched against right-wing elements within the government and party. This initiative strengthened the position of the leftists, the unions, and the JMNR youth wing. These more radical forces were demanding swifter nationalisation of key industries and a more resolute restructuring of the state to combat the bureaucratic bourgeoisie. Efforts to curtail the bloated bureaucracy of the Youlou-era had stalled because they were quickly perceived by many as being tribally motivated. Cuts were, however, urgently necessary; in 1964, civil servants made up less than one percent of the population but were absorbing close to 62 percent of national revenues.<sup>19</sup> These bureaucrats would often use their high wages to support their extended families, leading to a contradictory situation in the cities where unemployment was high but there was little beggary.

Massamba-Débat had tried to chart a centrist course between the right and left wings of his party.<sup>20</sup> After purging right-wing leaders in 1964/65, he moved against the left in 1966, targeting especially Maoist-inspired elements in the Party. An attempted *coup d'État* by left-wing army officers followed in June 1966, but the situation was de-escalated after Cuban troops sheltered members of Massamba-Débat's government, who then negotiated with the coup leaders. A new MNR charter was subsequently adopted, which reflected the strengthened position of the revolutionary-democratic faction of the Party. Their demands centred on the strategy of non-capitalist development and a stronger role for the state superstructure in this process:

"It is necessary – under the leadership of the proletariat and on the basis of the alliance of the working class with the peasantry, the urban petty bourgeoisie, the national bourgeoisie and progressive patriotic elements – to win a decisive victory over imperialism, feudalism, and the comprador and bureaucratic bourgeoisie. [We must] preserve national independence, establish a regime of national democracy, and move step by step towards socialism."<sup>21</sup>

This new charter also revealed a further development of the MNR's conception of the state and its relation to the Party. Now described as the "motor of the revolution", the Party was assigned a dominant role over the state apparatus. A "Permanent Commission" was set up to control the day-to-day work of the government. This marked a shift away from bourgeois state theory in favour of revolutionary-democratic principles. It was recognised that the non-capitalist path would not unfold spontaneously; this process would require the determined leadership of a party

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<sup>19</sup> V. Thompson and R. Adloff, pg. 100.

<sup>20</sup> M'Pandzou, pg. 78.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Pychtunov, pg. 232.

equipped with a grounded scientific analysis.<sup>22</sup> The revolutionaries in Congo began to regard the state not as a neutral entity, but as an instrument through which the Party would implement its policies.

## A “correction” of the degenerated revolution (1966–1968)

The negotiated settlement between Massamba-Débat and the revolutionary-democratic faction of the Party did not last long. Ambroise Noumazalaye, the first secretary of the MNR and figurehead of the Party’s Soviet-aligned wing, had secured the position of prime minister in May 1966.<sup>23</sup> In a meeting with a DDR delegation in August 1966, Noumazalaye provided an analysis of the intensified international and domestic situation confronting his country: After a major wave of national liberation in the early 1960s, “imperialism [had] launched a counter-offensive” – this was evident in Vietnam, Indonesia, Ghana, and Rhodesia.<sup>24</sup> The Sino-Soviet split had divided many national liberation movements, including the MNR, and was thus objectively playing into the hands of the imperialists. Perhaps most importantly, the Republic of Congo was completely isolated from the socialist bloc and the other anti-imperialist states in Africa. It was surrounded by capitalist-oriented states that often sought to destabilise the revolutionary process. The reactionary government in the Democratic Republic of Congo – which sat in Kinshasa, literally just a stone’s throw away from Brazzaville on the other side of the Congo River – was particularly aggressive towards the MNR.

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<sup>22</sup> Author collective, 1988, pg. 261.

<sup>23</sup> Noumazalaye had been a member of the French Communist Party during his studies in France and was widely seen as a communist. See V. Thompson and R. Adloff, pg. 162.

<sup>24</sup> Vietnam: The US orchestrated the “Gulf of Tonkin incident” in 1964 to create a *casus belli*. Indonesia: The G30S Movement in 1965 was used as a pretext for the massive repression against the Communist Party of Indonesia. Ghana: The revolutionary government of Kwame Nkrumah was toppled in 1966 by reactionary forces collaborating with the West. Rhodesia: The Zimbabwean armed struggle for national independence started in 1964, and the white colonial settler regime declared a minority-run republic in 1965.



*A hostile environment: Brazzaville was confronted with both the Portuguese colonial forces in Angola (especially in the neighbouring enclave Cabinda) and the anti-communist government in Kinshasa.*

Considering this critical situation, Noumazalaye and his allies in the politburo began advocating for the creation of a vanguard party that would be better capable of confronting the challenges facing the Congolese struggle. As a mass party, the MNR was not disciplined and unified enough to carry forward the socialist-oriented policies:

“The Republic of Congo, however, is looking to the future with confidence. The mistakes made in Algeria, Mali, Guinea, and Ghana should not be repeated in Congo. Sooner or later, the Marxist forces will create a vanguard party anchored in the masses. The necessity of the existence of such a party has only been properly recognised in the MNR since February [1966].”<sup>25</sup>

The MNR, as Noumazalaye remarked, was “not a firmly united party”.<sup>26</sup> It had emerged “in the heat of the revolutionary process” and there were “still many illusions [within the Party] about the nature of imperialism”. At the same time, tribalism represented a serious obstacle to progress because it objectively hindered national consciousness and gave rise to tribal-based conflicts around the distribution of positions in the state apparatus. Considering these realities, Noumazalaye explained that “Marxist forces are obliged not to move too fast, or else they will isolate themselves from the masses.”

<sup>25</sup> German Federal Archives, file DY 30-98154.

<sup>26</sup> German Federal Archives, file DY 30-98154.

Nonetheless, the revolution would have to muster “the inner strength for its own transformation”, otherwise it would be doomed to the same fate as Nkrumah’s Ghana.<sup>27</sup>



*Women working in SOTEXCO, Congo’s state-owned textile company.*

The consensus that had been negotiated in the charter of 1966 held throughout most of the next year. Yet in January 1968, President Massamba-Débat initiated a new offensive against the left and removed Noumazalaye and his allies from the government. They were replaced with more conservative figures such as Nicolas Mandjo, Congo’s ambassador to France, who was now appointed foreign minister.<sup>28</sup>

Critical of these developments and the stagnation of the revolution, the student organisation in Brazzaville held a congress in July of that same year and passed a resolution condemning the anti-leftist policies of the government. Fearing his position, Massamba-Débat ordered the arrest of those he believed to be behind the resolution – including a popular paratroop commander named Marien Nguabi. He then suspended the 1963 constitution and dissolved the National Assembly and the MNR’s politburo. This sparked spontaneous mass demonstrations by the student and youth movements, not unlike those seen exactly five years earlier in the *Trois Glorieuses*.<sup>29</sup> Nguabi was

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<sup>27</sup> C. Mährdel und N.A. Simonija, „Besonderheiten der Herausbildung von Parteien und ihrer Wechselbeziehungen zum Staatsapparat in Ländern nichtkapitalistischer Entwicklung“ in *Partei und Staat in den Ländern mit sozialistischer Orientierung*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 1974, pg. 31.

<sup>28</sup> German Federal Archives, file DY 30-98154.

<sup>29</sup> V. Thompson and R. Adloff, pg. 12.

freed from jail two days later by his soldiers and a National Revolutionary Council (CNR) was formed with Ngouabi as its head to replace the disbanded MNR politburo. The CNR freed all political prisoners and appointed a new provisional government, which included both left-wing and more moderate figures so as to initially stabilise the political situation. Ngouabi publicly justified the army's intervention, stating that "the old [state] apparatus, which came out of the revolution in August 1963, had been rendered ineffective by tribalism, and thus had to be smashed."<sup>30</sup>



*The leaders of the CNR, Captain Marien Ngouabi (middle) and Captain Alfred Raoul (right), with the arrested President Alphonse Massamba-Débat (left) in August 1968.*

This dynamic – the stagnation and breakdown of the mass party during the revolutionary process – was not unique to Congo. Similar developments could be seen in Mali, Algeria, and Syria. There came a point in the revolutionary process of these states when the pluralist national front was no longer able to advance the non-capitalist strategy. As M’Pandzou concluded:

“The MNR's policy was one of the first attempts in Sub-Saharan Africa to turn the state into an instrument of social progress. The aim was to overcome the neo-colonial, anti-democratic, pro-French policy of the Youlou regime. The state apparatus was to be transformed, democratised, and strengthened. This attempt stalled in its infancy, mainly because differences in the leadership of the MNR prevented a unified approach by the progressive forces.

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<sup>30</sup> German Federal Archives, file DY 30-98154.

Moreover, there was a lack of experience in developing a realistic concept for reorganizing the state apparatus under these complicated conditions. This largely explains the utilisation of bourgeois forms of power on the one hand and ‘left-wing’ unrealistic pretensions on the other. Nevertheless, [during these years], the first steps were taken which the subsequent revolutionary-democratic forces were able to build on.”<sup>31</sup>

The Marxist forces in Congo later described the period from 1963 to 1968 as the “first stage of the national-democratic people’s revolution”.<sup>32</sup> The task was now to build a new state apparatus, one that was in the service of the revolution. This required the formation of a unified and determined vanguard party, with a scientific programme and experienced cadre to consciously lead the construction of a new society. Under the leadership of Ngouabi, progressive army officers now initiated the process that revolutionary intellectuals like Noumazalaye had been propagating since early 1966.

## The inauguration of a new stage of the revolution (1968–1970)

The first year of the new government was characterised by an internal power struggle within the CNR between the left and the moderates. The former, led by Captain Ngouabi, favoured an accelerated nationalisation of foreign companies and closer relations with the socialist states, while the latter, led by Congo’s new president, Captain Alfred Raoul, argued that the country could not afford to lose ties with the capitalist West and thus could not risk rash nationalisations. In these disputes, the question of recognising the DDR once again played a central role, for it would determine the future direction of the revolution. The role of West German capital in the Congolese economy had expanded during Massamba-Débat’s presidency; alongside being the largest buyer of Congo’s timber exports, West German firms had now built several agricultural processing plants and the only cement factory in the country, giving them influence over all construction plans.<sup>33</sup>

The essence of this dispute revolved around the class character of the revolution: would petty-bourgeois forces continue to lead a national front, or was it time to definitively advance towards a “people’s state” that was based on workers’ and peasants’ power? By the end of 1969, Ngouabi and the revolutionary-democratic faction had gained the upper hand over the moderates by securing the support of the youth movement, the trade unions, and significant sections of the military.<sup>34</sup> It was decided in the CNR that a

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<sup>31</sup> M’Pandzou, pg. 80-81.

<sup>32</sup> M’Pandzou, pg. 80.

<sup>33</sup> German Federal Archives, file DY 30-98154.

<sup>34</sup> German Federal Archives, file DY 30-98154.

vanguard party of the working people would be created, and a more determined economic strategy would be pursued. It was argued that intensified relations with the socialist world system would help to “loosen the chain that binds us to the capitalist states”.<sup>35</sup>

A congress was then convened in Brazzaville in December 1969 to create the new party – the *Parti congolais du travail* (Congolese Party of Labour, PCT) – as an avant-garde of the working people, with Marxism-Leninism as its ideological foundation; it became the first governing party in Sub-Saharan Africa to do so. The mass organisations for the women’s and youth movements were also reconstituted. A new state – the *République populaire du Congo* (People’s Republic of Congo) – was proclaimed alongside a new constitution that again marked a significant shift away from bourgeois constitutional law. The class character and social substance of the state was now explicitly identified in the constitution, with the “working people” described as the bearers of the Congolese revolution. The various forms of property were fixed, and public ownership was prioritized. The PCT was guaranteed management and control functions over the state apparatus, with Article 5 stating that “representatives of the people in all organs of state power are responsible to Party organs”<sup>36</sup>. The primacy of the Party over the state was thus enshrined in the constitution. The new People’s Republic would still have to rely on the old administrative personnel trained under the colonial and Youlou eras, but the leading role of the PCT ensured that these bureaucrats could be controlled and utilised for the revolution.



*The proclamation of the People’s Republic of Congo in December 1969: Nguabi presents the country’s new flag.*

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<sup>35</sup> This is how Pierre Nzé, a left-wing member of the CNR described it to a DDR official. See German Federal Archives, file DY 30-98154.

<sup>36</sup> V. Y. Chirkin and Y. A. Yudin, pg. 141.

## The struggle to define people's democracy in Congo (1970–1972)

A revolutionary party is forged through praxis, not by decree. While the delegates at the 1969 Congress had adopted a party statute, they could not yet agree on a party programme. There was still dissent between Maoist and Marxist-Leninist factions around the appropriate model for the further development of both the Party and the country.<sup>37</sup> The PCT initially consisted of just 160 members. Was it to remain an elite cadre party or should it open to the masses? What degree of autonomy were the new mass organisations to have from the PCT? What role did the national bourgeoisie have to play in Congo's non-capitalist path of development? And how swiftly could foreign capital be pushed out of the national economy? These questions would define the next two years, as the PCT struggled to find unity in action.

Despite this political struggle within the PCT, great effort was placed on drawing the broader masses into the discussion around the party programme. The PCT organised mass meetings and educational seminars across the country to discuss the socio-economic situation and the tasks of the current phase of the revolution.<sup>38</sup> These developments reflected a further deepening of the democratisation of the revolution.

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<sup>37</sup> German Federal Archives, file M 1-C/920-74.

<sup>38</sup> German Federal Archives, file M 1-C/920-74.



*Ngouabi, who was originally from the poorer Northern region of Congo, travelled extensively throughout the rural areas to explore the problems facing the agricultural sector.*

The PCT focused primarily on cadre training during this intermediary period. The embassies of the socialist states were asked to assist, with the USSR supplying material such as Lenin's works, and the embassies of Vietnam, Korea, and Cuba organising reading circles.<sup>39</sup> The Party set out to create Revolutionary Committees in all workplaces and institutions to act as "instruments of the dictatorship of national democracy". These "RevComms" were tasked with anchoring the leading role of the PCT at the local level by mobilising the masses and introducing them to the Party.<sup>40</sup>

In 1970, Ngouabi's government began taking more control over domestic and foreign trade, while various sections of Congo's economy were nationalised, including the Congo-Ocean Railway and all roads, bridges, and airports.<sup>41</sup> French-owned agricultural refineries and timber companies were also selected for nationalisation, bringing 80,000 hectares of forestry land under public ownership.<sup>42</sup> Neighbouring African states often held capital shares in the processing companies marked for nationalisation, so the PCT

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<sup>39</sup> For ideological training, the USSR supplied large shipments of Lenin works to the PR Congo. The PCT asked the Soviet, Vietnamese, Korean, and Cuban embassies to organise reading circles. A campaign entitled "Lenin Week" was also organised in April 1970 to mark Lenin's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. See German Federal Archives, file DY 30-98154.

<sup>40</sup> Pychtunov, pg. 240 and German Federal Archives, file DY 30-98154.

<sup>41</sup> Pychtunov, pg. 246.

<sup>42</sup> German Federal Archives, file M 1-C/920-74.

tried to tread carefully.<sup>43</sup> France reacted to the nationalisations by demanding swift repayment of the large debt owed to it by Brazzaville. In response, the PCT launched another wave of nationalisations and imposed rigorous restrictions on French businesses operating in Congo.<sup>44</sup> Brazzaville then withdrew from the intergovernmental *Organisation commune africaine et malgache* (OCAM), which had become dominated by France's imperialist influence.<sup>45</sup> In some instances, the PCT was able to retain the French technicians working in these formerly private companies, but the shortage of specialists seriously hindered Congo's state sector.<sup>46</sup> Especially when it came to timber, the initiatives to create a domestic processing industry stalled due to a lack of capital resources, skill, and knowledge of the conditions prevailing in the highly specialised world wood markets.<sup>47</sup>

On foreign policy, the Party also implemented more daring initiatives. At the founding congress in December 1969, the delegates had passed a resolution to officially recognise the DDR, making the PR Congo one of the first Sub-Saharan states to do so.<sup>48</sup> A trade deal and credit agreement with the DDR worth 6 million US dollars followed in March 1970.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, the realities of the situation in Central Africa had not changed: Ngouabi's government began normalising relations with neighbouring Congo-Kinshasa in an attempt to ease tensions in the region and reduce the PR Congo's isolation. It was hoped that – despite ideological differences – intra-African trade could help reduce dependency on Western markets. This move was, however, strongly condemned by Maoist members of the PCT's central committee who did not want to negotiate with Mobutu's comprador regime in Kinshasa, especially after Pierre Mulele – a Congolese Maoist and former minister under Patrice Lumumba – had been lured out of his exile in Brazzaville and then brutally tortured to death in Kinshasa in 1968.

## Constructing a new state apparatus (1972)

By the end of 1972, Ngouabi and his allies had survived numerous attempts to topple the young government.<sup>50</sup> These attacks reached a high point in February 1972, when

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<sup>43</sup> German Federal Archives, file DY 30-98154.

<sup>44</sup> V. Thompson and R. Adloff, pg. 14.

<sup>45</sup> V. Thompson and R. Adloff, pg. 81.

<sup>46</sup> German Federal Archives, file DY 30-98154.

<sup>47</sup> Thompson and R. Adloff, pg. 93.

<sup>48</sup> Two members of the PCT's new central committee had also received ideological training in East Germany. See German Federal Archives, file DY 30-98154.

<sup>49</sup> German Federal Archives, file DL2-10588.

<sup>50</sup> In March 1970, mercenaries (likely backed by the CIA) attempted to overthrow the PR Congo government. In November 1971, ultra-leftist students organised strikes in Brazzaville and Pointe Noire. Maoist-inspired elements were thereafter purged from the PCT. In retaliation, the pro-China ministers Ange Diawara and Claude-Ernest N'dalla led an armed *coup d'État* against Ngouabi in February 1972 and came very close to victory. They were eventually captured and executed.

armed Maoists very nearly succeeded in overthrowing Nguabi. After defeating the revolting officers, the PCT and its youth organisation were left numerically weaker, but the Marxist-Leninist faction had consolidated its position in the Party.



*Ngouabi accepts gifts from international delegates to the PCT at the Second Extraordinary Congress in December 1972.*

This victory brought the internal disputes to a close and a party programme was finally adopted at the Second Extraordinary Congress in December 1972, two years after the PCT's founding. The programme rejected the ultra-leftist slogan that the PR Congo had already become a socialist state simply by adopting Marxism-Leninism as its ideological foundation and instead asserted that a long path lay ahead before Congo could begin with the construction of socialism. The current stage of the revolution was now officially described as the “national-democratic popular revolution”:

“National, because this stage aims at overthrowing the domination of French imperialism, which controls the national economy and therefore also objectively controls the political situation. This stage also aims at establishing the objective and subjective preconditions for the consolidation of the Congolese nation, by eliminating the bases of tribalism and regionalism.

Democratic, because it aims to replace the rule of a minority over the vast majority of the people; because it relies on the popular masses (the workers, peasants, and revolutionary intellectuals in particular), and [the revolution] is their work under the banner of the PCT.

Popular, finally, because it begins to lay the economic, social, and cultural foundations for the next stage, which is the Socialist Revolution. This is done by encouraging all the necessary objective, psychological, and subjective conditions, and by mobilising the broad disinherited masses under the banner of the proletariat and its avant-garde, the PCT.”<sup>51</sup>

The priority during this stage of the revolution was solving the question of state power. As Article 4 of the new party programme stated:

“The contemporary state is a legacy of colonialism. The machinery of neocolonial rule must be smashed and replaced by a revolutionary, democratic people’s state.”<sup>52</sup>

This notion of smashing and replacing the old state had been formulated by Lenin in *State and Revolution* in 1917. The socialist states that had been constructed in Eastern Europe had not, however, emerged out of a neocolonial context. In Sub-Saharan Africa, this was a qualitatively new task that would require its own approach. When studying the question of the revolutionary state in the post-colonial context, the Soviet scholars Chirkin and Yudin noted that the destruction of the old and the formation of a new state apparatus, “which is a general law of genuinely popular revolutions, follows a specific pattern in each given country depending on the concrete historical conditions of revolutionary development.”<sup>53</sup> In Russia, for example, the bourgeois state apparatus was dismantled relatively quickly after the October Revolution, and the pre-existing workers’ and soldiers’ councils (the soviets) swiftly “became the bulwark of the new administrative machinery”. In the People’s Democracies of Eastern Europe, on the other hand, “the old forms of parliamentary, local self-government, and administrative institutions were in use for quite a long period of time” before they were cardinally reorganised along socialist principles in a process that took a relatively long time.

“These examples show that the pace, ways, and methods of removing the old and forming a new machinery of state can be quite different. They depend on the correlation of class forces both in the given country and on the international

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<sup>51</sup> M. Ngouabi, *Vers la construction d’une société socialiste en Afrique*, Paris, 1975, pg. 52-53.

<sup>52</sup> Article 4 of the PCT’s 1972 programme. Cited in M’Panzou, pg. 81 and V. Y. Chirkin and Y. A. Yudin, pg. 124.

<sup>53</sup> V. Y. Chirkin and Y. A. Yudin, pg. 124.

scene, peaceful or non-peaceful development of the revolutionary process, existence of democratic traditions and many other factors.”

The conditions in Congo posed unique challenges for the PCT. The Congolese economy was still dominated by foreign capital. At the same time, pre-feudal relations continued to shape many aspects of Congolese society, particularly in the poorer north. Tribalism was rife and represented an open door through which counterrevolutionary forces could incite in-fighting. Finally, the PCT had also inherited a bloated state machine with a massive class of colonially educated bureaucrats who were eager to maintain their privileges.

### The PR Congo’s working population (1972)



*In the early 1970s, DDR doctoral student Lizzy Derz worked with PCT cadre to conduct a study on the PR Congo’s workforce, which amounted to roughly 510,000 people at the time.*

Against this background, Ngouabi knew that the construction of a new society would not happen spontaneously – it required an efficient state apparatus guided by a scientific analysis and strategy. All state and social institutions would have to be moulded and united around the requirements of the revolution. If parts of the state machinery – such as the military – separated themselves from the Party, then the revolution would quickly break down, just as it had in Ghana and Mali in the 1960s. Within the framework of the constitution, the Party had to be committed to the political (although not administrative) guidance of the state apparatus; it had to orient, review, and instruct the activity of state organs.

To combat tribalism, Nguouabi's emphasised the need for a materialist analysis: under colonialism, there had an been an objective inequality between ethnic tribes in terms of both socio-economic and cultural development. These roots of tribalism had to be eliminated by intensifying development in the poorer northern regions. National consciousness should be fostered upon a non-capitalist basis, with the masses rallying around the revolution. At the same time, party committees would have to be established in all state bodies and military units in order to resolutely combat tribalist tendencies and bind these institutions to the revolutionary cause.



*As a strong advocate of science, Marien Nguouabi advanced the idea that scientific laws governed not only the natural world, but also the development of human society. Here he attends a chemistry lesson at the University of Brazzaville (today the Université Marien Nguouabi).*

Ngouabi laid out the class character of the young people's democracy: "We are fighting for the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the first step in the proletariat taking power is the dictatorship of the majority."<sup>54</sup> The main element of this united front was the working class, in alliance with the peasants and the revolutionary intelligentsia. The middle bourgeoisie, small merchants, and artisans were in contradiction with imperialism and could thus also play a progressive role. This idea was an elaboration of Lenin's theory of the "revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants", adapted to the neocolonial context.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> M. Nguouabi, pg. 49.

<sup>55</sup> Author collective, 1988, pg. 263.

Accordingly, new local organs of people's power were set up in urban and rural areas. All working classes would be represented in these assemblies, and non-PCT members could be elected as well.<sup>56</sup> The parliament was reconstituted in 1973, and the number of delegates was doubled to ensure adequate rural representation. The new constitution that had been drafted at the 1972 Congress was put to a public referendum in June 1973 and received approval from 73.5 percent of the electorate.<sup>57</sup> All these measures reflected a further revolutionization and democratisation of the political process.

## The Nguabi era and the discovery of oil (1972–1977)

The consolidation of the national-democratic revolution in 1972 gave rise to a spirit of optimism and determination in Congo during the mid-1970s.<sup>58</sup> Nguabi's government unrolled new economic measures to curtail the influence of foreign capital. This included the nationalisation of the land, limitations on the transfer of profits abroad, an increase of public shares in private mining companies, a state monopoly on the marketing of timber, and the cancellation of old agreements with France.<sup>59</sup> The PCT also set the objective of replacing all experts and technicians from France with Congolese cadre that had been trained in the socialist states. In 1974, all trading firms were required to "Congolise" their personnel. Foreign investments and technicians would now only be permitted in certain sectors, and they had to provide a plan for their prospective replacement by Congolese funds and cadre.<sup>60</sup>



*Nguabi (left) meets with leaders of the MPLA in August 1974. The PCT was a key ally of the liberation movement in neighbouring Angola and helped the MPLA to set up military bases along the border.*

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<sup>56</sup> V. Y. Chirkin and Y. A. Yudin, pg. 138.

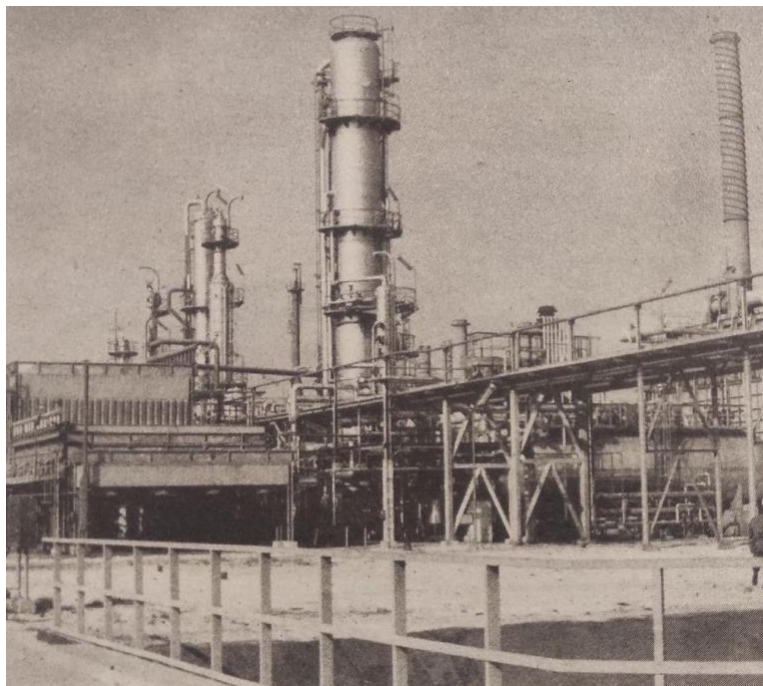
<sup>57</sup> V. Thompson and R. Adloff, pg. 15.

<sup>58</sup> V. Thompson and R. Adloff, pg. 16.

<sup>59</sup> German Federal Archive, file M 1-C/920-74.

<sup>60</sup> V. Thompson and R. Adloff, pg. 16.

The founding of the People's Republic also coincided with a fateful economic development in the country. In 1969, after years of speculation, French and Italian firms had discovered massive offshore oil deposits along Congo's coast. Brazzaville had granted these companies prospecting permits, knowing that there was no indigenous knowledge or technology to do so. In return, these foreign companies were supposed to transfer 20 percent of their annual earnings to Congo's national budget.<sup>61</sup> France's Elf-Aquitaine and Italy's ENI soon made a killing as they syphoned off the vast majority of Congo's oil wealth. The revenue generated by the 20-percent shares nonetheless turned Congo's trade balance around and, by 1975, a trade surplus was recorded for the first time. This fortune helped bolster the optimistic atmosphere in Brazzaville and an ambitious new national development plan reflected this. With the aim of gradually taking control over the new lucrative oil sector, the PCT demanded a greater share of Elf's and ENI's profits and established a nationally owned oil company named Hydrocongo. When American oil companies showed up to take advantage of the new discoveries, Brazzaville stipulated that half of their revenue would eventually have to be transferred to Hydrocongo.



*The oil refinery plant run by the state-owned Hydrocongo in the city of Pointe Noire.*

The discovery of offshore oil was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it provided a much-needed upswing in public revenue, with oil soon taking over timber to become Congo's main export. Between 1970 and 1975, the real gross national product increased by 8.2 percent, with much of these funds going towards social and

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<sup>61</sup> V. Thompson and R. Adloff, pg. 168.

infrastructure spending.<sup>62</sup> The number of students enrolled in schools was tripled, with over 350,000 children receiving free education by the late 1970s.<sup>63</sup> Yet, at the same time, Congo was lured into a deep dependency on oil, which by the mid-1980s made up over 80 percent of the country's exports.<sup>64</sup> If commissions on foreign-owned timber companies had been an easy, yet non-productive source of revenue for Congo, commissions on oil extraction were no different. Despite great efforts, the state-owned Hydrocongo struggled and ultimately failed to take control of the refining and marketing of the country's oil output. Competition with the well-financed and experienced French and Italian subsidiaries was simply too great. More fatally, however, the Congolese economy was now completely vulnerable to the boom-bust cycle of the capitalist world market. While the early 1970s brought in record revenue for Brazzaville, the global recession in 1974 caused Congo's real gross national product growth to contract from 8.2 percent to just 1.6 percent in 1975 and 1976.

Oil thus deepened the People's Republic's economic dependency on the West. In 1976, over half of Congolese exports were still destined for the EEC, while close to 70 percent of imports were coming from Western Europe.<sup>65</sup> The neocolonial realities of Sub-Saharan Africa were also revealed by Congo's meagre trade with its neighbours: only 7.5 percent of Congo's imports came from the neighbouring states in the Central African UDEAC customs union. Exports to UDEAC countries were completely negligible. The socialist states, for their part, had built strong political ties with Brazzaville, but had failed to replace the capitalist powers as a meaningful trading partner. The socialist bloc accounted for just 4 percent of Congo's imports, while exports were only slightly higher than 8 percent. This was something Ngouabi and his allies polemicised bilaterally with socialist governments and occasionally even publicly in the mid-1970s.<sup>66</sup>

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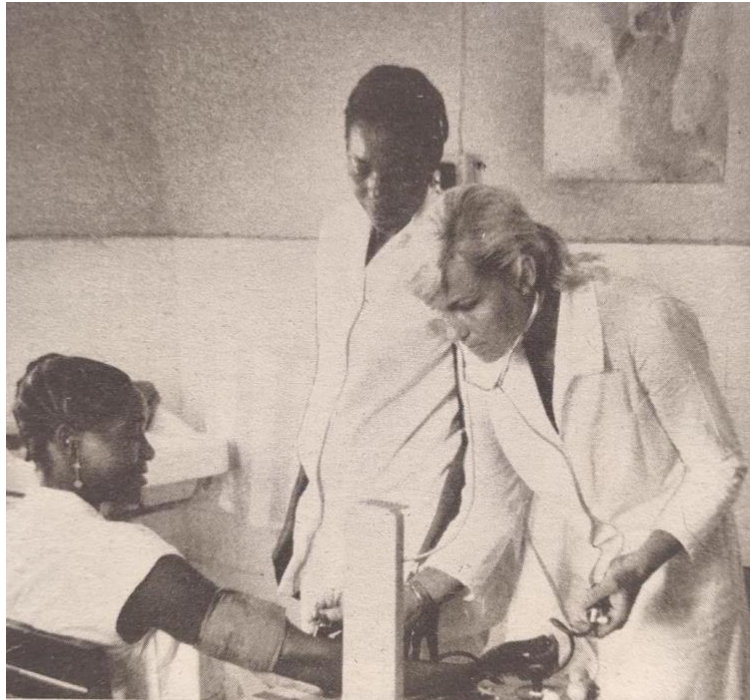
<sup>62</sup> German Federal Archive, file DL2-10588.

<sup>63</sup> *Horizont* (DDR Foreign Policy Magazine), Article Nr. 36/1979.

<sup>64</sup> German Federal Archive, file DL2-10588.

<sup>65</sup> German Federal Archive, file DL2-10588.

<sup>66</sup> German Federal Archive, file M 1-C/920-74.



*One of the many DDR citizens helping to train a new generation of Congolese professionals: Dr. Helga Buchecker teaching young medical students in a polyclinic in Brazzaville.*

The PCT itself went through a further development during these years too. Since 1970, Ngouabi had been pushing for the expansion of party membership to secure a broader mass base and anchor the Party in both the rural interior and in the army.<sup>67</sup> Yet it was not until December 1974, when Ngouabi was re-elected as chairman of the PCT, that he was able to convince the majority of the central committee to back his proposal. He subsequently led this initiative and membership expanded 6-fold, from 227 members to 1,427 by 1975. The politburo also grew from 5 to 8 members and the central committee from 40 to 50. These efforts helped to ensure that mass organisations and the military were represented within and tied to the Party.

In an effort to accelerate the sluggish process of reorganising the state apparatus, the PCT set up a special committee in 1975 to remove “irrecuperable cadres” from power. A policy entitled “power to the people” was initiated to make administrative positions more accessible to workers and peasants.<sup>68</sup> This “radicalisation of the Party” was driven by the youth organisation, as students were demanding more aggressive policies against the “overprivileged and overpaid” bureaucrats. Bowing to this pressure, the government and the PCT’s central committee and politburo were reshuffled. Ngouabi announced that a Third Extraordinary PCT Congress would be held in 1977 to continue this restructuring process and combat the bureaucracy that was profiting off the new oil

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<sup>67</sup> German Federal Archive, file M 1-C/920-74.

<sup>68</sup> V. Thompson and R. Adloff, pg. 101.

revenues. Before the congress could be held, however, Nguabi was assassinated by members of the presidential guard who ambushed him at his home on 18 March 1977.

It remains unclear who was behind Nguabi's assassination. The military was quick to arrest various prominent figures, including former president Massamba-Débat, who was swiftly tried and executed for his alleged involvement. Western observers such as Thompson and Adloff have suggested a connection with the planned Third Extraordinary Congress: disgruntled bureaucrats and officers were perhaps fearful for their positions. A "strictly confidential" report in the DDR archives suggests a different motive. Hermann Axen (the director of the international department of the DDR's ruling SED) was sent a letter in which prominent PCT members who had studied in the DDR claimed that Nguabi was killed after he internally announced plans to "end Congo's vacillating foreign policy between the USSR, China, and France" and seek a friendship agreement with the Soviet Union, just as Angola had done several months prior.<sup>69</sup> It was hoped that a close alignment with the USSR would further deepen economic ties and thus help reduce Congo's dependency on the West. This resolution was allegedly to be submitted to the Third Extraordinary Congress for approval, so anti-Soviet elements within the PCT struck before it could be put forward. It remained unclear, however, who these anti-Soviet elements were exactly.



*Ngouabi's funeral in Brazzaville, 2 April 1977.*

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<sup>69</sup> The report was written by the director of the SED's "Karl Marx" Party School. A Congolese alumnus of the school had returned to the DDR for a holiday in August 1977 and met with his former professor, whom he confided in. A group of Congolese PCT members and alumni of the "Karl Marx" School – including prominent cadres such as the director of Congo's largest state-owned enterprise – had allegedly sent Nguabi a letter several months before his assassination in which they pressed the president to seek a friendship agreement with the USSR. Nguabi is said to have agreed to the proposal and announced this internally. See German Federal Archive, file DY 30.98818.

Immediately after the assassination, an emergency military junta was established, and the 1973 constitution was repealed. Ngouabi's closest allies were dispatched abroad to limit their influence on Congo's political developments. The PCT was *de facto* suspended. These steps suggest that the assassination was indeed intended to counter Ngouabi's ideological orientation. Regardless of the motivation, Ngouabi's death marked a significant setback in Congo's revolutionary process. He was not only a skilled politician and military commander, but an outstanding Marxist theoretician who had enriched scientific socialism with his analyses of Congolese society and the challenges facing Sub-Saharan Africa. A selection of his writings and speeches were published in the book *Vers la construction d'une société socialiste en Afrique*. It includes his speech at a 1975 conference in Dakar, Senegal, where he formulated a historical materialist analysis of Congolese society and advocated for scientific socialism rather than the idea of an "African socialism".

### A new economic policy: *auto-centré et autodynamique* (1977–1984)

The *Comité militaire du parti* that took over following Ngouabi's murder was led by Joachim Yhombi-Opango, a conservative colonel who had previously been demoted by Ngouabi.<sup>70</sup> His presidency over the People's Republic lasted just two years and it represented a period of political stagnation. The PCT was eventually able to remove Yhombi-Opango in February 1979 and replace him with Denis Sassou Nguesso, who was widely seen as a capable successor to Ngouabi's revolutionary legacy.

As his first act, Sassou Nguesso convened the long-awaited Third Extraordinary Congress in 1979 and a new constitution was drafted, which was then put to the public and approved by 85 percent of the 700,000 strong electorate. The new constitution preserved and expanded the constitution from 1973. The basic means of production were protected as people's property, while the private sector was permitted under the condition that it remained under state supervision. The Party and the state were once again conceptualised as a unified instrument of power: the secretary general of the PCT was simultaneously the president of the People's Republic. The electorate now gained the right of recall over representatives in the National Assembly. However, closer alignment with the Soviet Union was not discussed.

The congress adopted a more sober analysis of Congo's economic situation. By the end of the 1970s, the state sector had been expanded and now accounted for approximately 30 percent of industrial output. Yet, state-owned enterprises were struggling to make ends meet. At the same time, despite being an agrarian country, Congo was heavily

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<sup>70</sup> V. Thompson and R. Adloff, pg.18.

dependent on imported foodstuffs. The colonially imposed practice of cultivating monocultures still shaped many agricultural enterprises. The cost of importing foodstuffs was a significant drain on the state's accumulation; these funds could instead be spent on importing technology.<sup>71</sup> As such, the PCT adopted three central policies at the 1979 congress: to reorganise the state enterprises, to increase agricultural production, and – in the current phase – focus on controlling the private sector rather than eliminating it. These policies were part of a new strategy entitled *auto-centré et autodynamique* (self-oriented and self-dynamic), through which the PCT sought to emphasise domestic solutions to Congo's problems, as opposed to relying on foreign assistance:

“The main levers of the Congolese economy must lie within the national borders. An independent Congolese economy means control of the commanding heights of the economy, mastery over financial and monetary problems, inter- and intra-regional integration, appropriation of technology, control over foreign trade ... The independent national economy must ... be controlled by the Congolese people themselves.”

As had been previously acknowledged by the PCT, the economy of the “transitional period” was essentially a competition between different types of property relations.<sup>72</sup> Yet now the Party emphasised that the strengthening of state-owned enterprises could not be achieved by administratively restraining private enterprises. Instead, the public sector should aim to develop more swiftly relative to the private sector. The state had to focus on supporting its own enterprises, while only interfering in the private sector to prevent excesses (e.g., speculation). The elimination of private ownership over the means of production was a distant objective to be pursued at a later stage of the revolution. This also had implications for the PR Congo's approach to foreign capital, as the Congolese economist Jacques Ndokou wrote in 1987:

“Foreign capital plays a contradictory role. On the one hand – and this is the essential point – it is the decisive factor in economic dependence, the extractive character of the economy, its disproportionality. On the other hand, [foreign capital] cannot simply be ‘eliminated’. Firstly, the political balance of power does not allow this. Secondly, [foreign capital] is a ‘channel’ through which modern techniques and technology enter the country, so that a more highly qualified working class can emerge, especially in the companies it controls. As the experiences of the ‘New Economic Policy’ in Soviet Russia in the early 1920s, but

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<sup>71</sup> J. Ndokou, “Voraussichtliche und erforderliche soziale Veränderungen im Hinblick auf die Errichtung einer sozialistischen Gesellschaft in der Volksrepublik Kongo“ in *Zur Entwicklung in der Volksrepublik Kongo*, Berlin, 1987, pg. 45.

<sup>72</sup> Ndokou, pg. 47.

also the very interesting developments in China today, show, foreign capital can certainly contribute to the development of national productive forces if its sphere of influence is limited.”<sup>73</sup>

The 1980s were thus characterised by a new economic strategy that drew inspiration from Lenin’s New Economic Policy. Interestingly, the PCT started to formulate this strategy in 1978, at the same time as the Communist Party of China began implementing its “reform and opening-up” policy. Based on the backward nature of the Congolese economy, the idea was now to “*develop* the state sector by *using* the private sector” – i.e., planning economic development through state-owned enterprises and complementing this process with the activity of private firms. “The strengthening of the national economy in all its sectors is a decisive prerequisite for pushing back the current dominance of foreign capital,” as Ndokou argued.<sup>74</sup>

This reorientation of economic strategy was coupled with a re-assessment of the class constellation in the PR Congo. The national-democratic revolution had been premised on the idea that the nascent working class would grow in strength during this process and progressively take over the hegemony in the revolution to initiate its eventual transition to a socialist revolution. While the working class had expanded over the past 15 years, it remained relatively weak and underqualified in the early 1980s. It was a “working class of the first generation”, consisting largely of former peasants who had fled rural areas to find jobs in the city. As such, “ethnic particularism” was rife and continued to hinder the development of a class consciousness.<sup>75</sup> The *auto-centré et autodynamique* thus aimed to upskill the working class and train them in the use of modern technology by employing them in joint ventures with foreign capital.

In the meantime, the PCT continued to be carried primarily by the intelligentsia, who represented only 5 percent of the total population, but constituted 25 percent of the party’s membership.

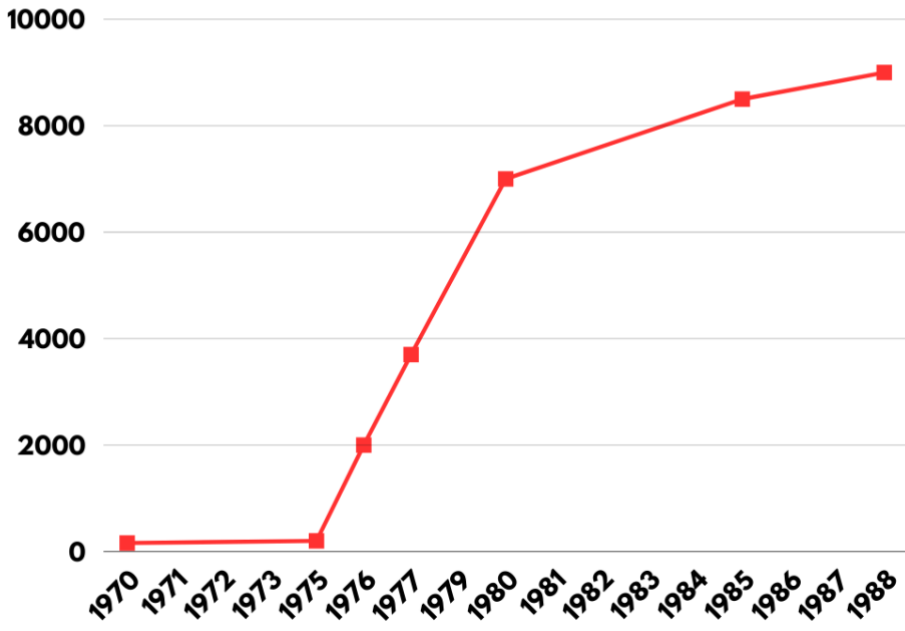
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<sup>73</sup> Ndokou, pg. 49.

<sup>74</sup> Ndokou, pg. 43.

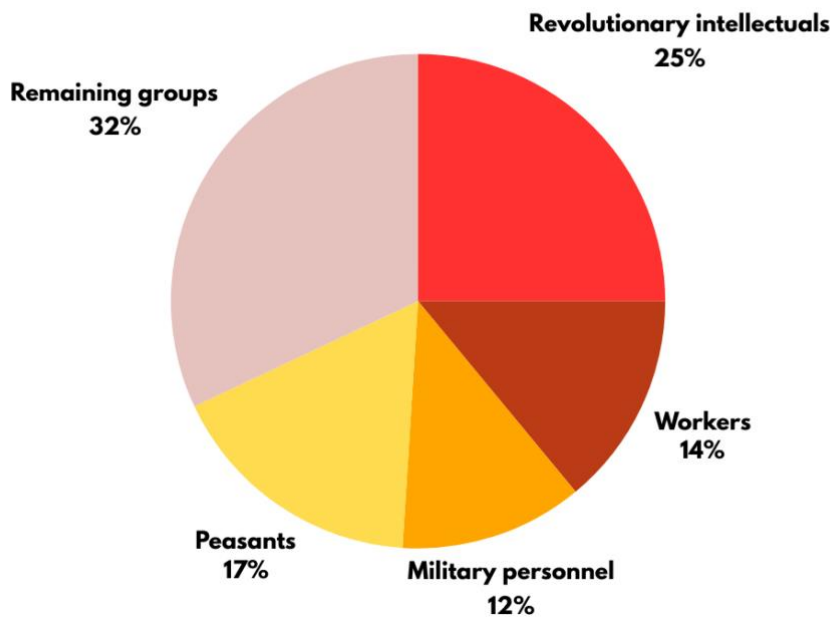
<sup>75</sup> Ndokou, pg. 56.

### Growth of PCT membership



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### Social composition of the PCT (1988)



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<sup>76</sup> Data gathered from Ndokou and Schmidt.

<sup>77</sup> Ndokou, pg. 61.

## Stagnation and retreat (1984–1990)

Since 1970, the socialist states had expanded their economic relations with the PR Congo. DDR officials understood that Congo's dependency on the capitalist world market was perpetuated by its role as a supplier of raw material, so they sought to assist the young people's democracy in industrialising. The DDR had been supplying Brazzaville with long-term credits with guaranteed low interest rates since 1970. The strategy rested on facilitating the import of East German machinery and equipment, specifically relating to electricity generation, communication systems, construction, natural resource processing, and printing.<sup>78</sup> The DDR also sent advisors to help with the management of state-owned enterprises in the textile and ceramics industries. A further 7.3 million USD was invested into the education and training of over 800 Congolese students, workers, and cadre in East Germany. By the late 1980s, solidarity goods worth almost 4 million USD had been dispatched to Congo. There was thus a significant transfer of knowledge and technology to Congo. Yet despite this progress, the economic relations between the socialist bloc and Congo never reached the same level as their political relations. The Soviet Union – which sought to support the creation of lead and zinc industries in the early 1980s – was ultimately unable to supplant the West as Congo's main trading partner.

Like many other former colonies, the PR Congo was being suffocated by the debt crisis in the 1980s. By 1985, Brazzaville's debt had reached 2 billion USD, which equated to 68.7 percent of the gross social product.<sup>79</sup> That year, the Congolese state had to use 50 percent of its revenue just to service its ongoing debt repayment obligations. The debt accumulated from previous years could not be paid off. The DDR showed understanding by repeatedly deferring payments owed by Brazzaville, but this of course had detrimental effects on the East German economy too. The World Bank stepped in to offer credit to Brazzaville, but it stipulated that the funds could only be invested in the most profitable areas of the economy. This further prevented the PCT from strengthening the state sector.<sup>80</sup>

By the mid-1980s, the revolutionary zeal had faded markedly, both within the PCT and the communist world movement. With the ascension of Mikhail Gorbachev to general

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<sup>78</sup> The DDR's credits were intended to go towards the construction of plants capable of producing manganese-silicon, which is used in steel production. Gabon exported ore by rail to the port in Pointe Noire, so the Congolese hoped to process this natural resource themselves. The volume of the credit increased from 6 million USD in 1970 to 56 million USD by 1988, and interest payments were repeatedly deferred at the request of the PCT. See German Federal Archive, files DL 2-10586 and DL 2/10588.

<sup>79</sup> The socialist states used the concept of gross social product to measure the total material wealth (both means of production and consumer goods) produced in society over a particular period (usually annually). See L. Kounkou, pg. 31.

<sup>80</sup> L. Kounkou, pg. 31.

secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1985, a doctrine of “new thinking” dominated the USSR’s foreign policy. The drive to support “economically weaker” socialist-oriented states like Congo and Afghanistan was supplanted by a desire to expand economic relations with larger capitalist states in the Global South like Brazil or Argentina. In the PR Congo, Sassou-Nguesso began moving away from the idea of intensifying relations with the socialist camp. He instead turned to advisors from France and the World Bank and, in 1984, even initiated a purge against the “pro-Soviet” faction of the PCT that had been pushing for closer relations with the socialist bloc.<sup>81</sup> Trade with the DDR slumped thereafter, as the Congolese government showed little interest in using the credit granted by East Germany.

Faced with an increasingly despondent CPSU and PCT, the SED continued its support for the PR Congo but was clearly unsettled by these developments. In 1985, DDR analysts concluded in an internal assessment:

“As a result of internal class struggles and the influence of the external balance of power, compromises have been made. For example, solutions to important – and theoretically recognised – questions such as the dismantling of the old state apparatus, the economic recovery of the state sector, the restriction of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, which has been pending for a long time, have been avoided in practice or are only being tackled very inconsistently.

There is a growing contradiction between the declared political goals and certain positive changes in the superstructure on the one hand and the growing economic dependence on imperialism and the lack of progressive changes in the socio-economic basis and the continued existence of the neo-colonialist state apparatus on the other hand. If there is no reversal of this trend, there is an increasing danger to the socialist orientation [of the PR Congo].”<sup>82</sup>

After the dismantling of the socialist world system at the beginning of the 1990s, the PCT was one of many revolutionary-democratic parties to retreat politically and concede to Western liberalism. Congo-Brazzaville was also one of several former socialist-oriented countries to descend into civil war after 1990. Except for a brief five-year interlude, Sassou-Nguesso and the now social democratic PCT have remained in government in the Republic of Congo.

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<sup>81</sup> The leader of this faction was Captain Francois-Xavier Katali, who was demoted in 1984 alongside another prominent leftist minister, Jean-Pierre Thystère Tchicaya. See V. Thompson and R. Adloff, pg. 31.

<sup>82</sup> German Federal Archive, file DL2-10588.

## Conclusion

Liberal scholars were quick to pronounce capitalism victorious after 1990. They described the collapse of the anti-imperialist and communist movements as the “end of history”. Yet today, more than three decades later, the contradictions of the capitalist world system are necessarily giving rise to new anti-imperialist movements across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and we can clearly see that history is far from being “over”. One of the most glaring examples is the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), which has now ejected Western military forces from their strongholds in West Africa. The AES governments are now searching for ways to break out of France’s neocolonial grip. For many communist forces across the continent and beyond, the national-democratic revolution remains a central strategic orientation and, as such, the historical experiences of Congo-Brazzaville have gained renewed relevance.

Considering the question of state power posed in the introduction, the Congolese revolution undoubtedly made an important contribution to state theory in the neocolonial context. What set Congo-Brazzaville apart from other revolutionary states in Africa was that it held out for over 25 years, defying all internal and external counterrevolutionary attacks and even weathering changes in leadership relatively well. The same cannot be said for Ghana, Mali, Guinea, Egypt, Algeria, and so on. This, I would argue, is predominantly due to the success of the Congolese revolution in mustering “the inner strength for its own transformation”. The revolutionaries were able to advance from a national-democratic state with a mass party (1963–1968) to a people’s democracy with a vanguard party of the working people (1969–1990). The latter represented a more “mature, developed form of the revolutionary-democratic state power” and was thus more capable of defending and developing the revolution after its initial phase.<sup>83</sup>

In this connection, one of the most challenging aspects of the struggle in Africa was that vanguard parties like the PCT emerged only *after* the revolutionary process had begun.

“In the beginning, state power is conquered, and only as a next step does one begin to create the party organisation and its mass base from above. In this case, the party is not the instrument of a particular class to seize power, but an instrument to assert the power already seized and to further utilise it to fulfil an already predetermined programme.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> V. Y. Chirkin, „Die Entwicklung der Staatsmacht in den Ländern sozialistischer Orientierung“, in *Asien, Afrika Lateinamerika*, 1984, iss. 12, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 1984, pg. 225 – 233.

<sup>84</sup> Cited in C. Mährdel and N.A. Simonija, pg. 56.

This process unfolds against the background of an intense class struggle. In the Congolese context, it started with the founding of the MNR, one year after the popular revolution when the capitalist-oriented forces had to be pushed out of government. Over the next five years, the MNR was able to advance the national-democratic revolution and organise a mass base, but it had eventually run its course. The uprising led by Ngouabi in August 1968 was a necessary “corrective measure” to combat the bureaucratic bourgeoisie and realise what the revolutionary intelligentsia had been pushing for since early 1966: the creation of a vanguard party with a clear class character and a scientifically grounded analysis. While it is true that non-working-class forces (mainly the civil and military intelligentsia) maintained hegemony in Congo’s revolutionary process until the end, they had managed to deepen the democratic character of the revolution and progressively draw the working masses into local organs of power and the constitutional drafting process. What is more, the Party had adopted scientific socialism: “Since this is the ideology of the working class, the leading role of these forces can arguably be understood as a specific, indirect form of working-class hegemony, or at least as an approach, an element of this hegemony, a step towards it,” as the Soviet scholar V. Y. Chirkin concluded.<sup>85</sup>

As such, the national-democratic revolution must be understood as a process, as an evolutionary dynamic that gradually creates both the objective and subjective preconditions for socialist revolution. This was clearly evident in the periodic redrafting of Congo-Brazzaville’s constitution, which progressively moved away from bourgeois constitutionality and increasingly adopted proletarian conceptions of state power. Similar dynamics could be seen in the other people’s republics of Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, and South Yemen – all of which held out until the collapse of the socialist world system in 1990. As Ngouabi had argued so well, in societies where (neo)colonialism had deeply distorted basic historical development (e.g., the formation of nations, the overcoming of feudal and pre-feudal relations, etc.), it would be utopian to imagine that socialism could be established immediately.

The unresolved contradiction for the PCT was the second question formulated in the introduction: the relation between the national-democratic revolution and foreign capital. Contrary to initial expectations, it had proved immensely difficult for Congo to escape its subordinate and dependent role in the international capitalist division of labour. The so-called “pro-Soviet” faction of the MNR and PCT had advanced an agenda of gradually nationalising foreign companies and restricting the private sector. Yet, by itself, this strategy had failed to bring about the desired results. State-owned enterprises were crippled by a lack of technical cadre and the competition with far

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<sup>85</sup> V. Y. Chirkin, 1984, pg. 231.

stronger multinational companies on the world market. Attempts to create processing industries in both the timber and oil sectors failed.

This stemmed largely from the incapacities of the socialist world system, which was the third question focused on in this article. The transfer of technology and knowledge from the USSR, China, DDR, Cuba, and many other socialist states was immense. Such relations represented a qualitative break with the neocolonial practices of the West. The socialist states did not aim to simply be buyers of Congo's raw materials; they tried to get involved in the production process and foster the country's industrialisation. This was because the communists understood that no sum of aid or credit could free the former colonies from exploitation. If the distorted nature of the national economy was not radically transformed, and if the domination of foreign capital was not broken, then the relations that created Africa's dependency would only be reproduced. There had to be a qualitative transformation of both the internal socio-economic relations and the external conditions on the world stage. This latter point is where the communist world movement struggled most. The economic relations with Congo and other revolutionary states in Africa were ultimately not broad enough to enable them to disengage from the capitalist world system. It does not appear as if the socialist governments had a strategy for integrating economies like Congo-Brazzaville, Angola, Mozambique, and Afghanistan into an international socialist division of labour. The much-touted "socialist economic integration" that was to be advanced in Comecon had stalled by the late 1970s.<sup>86</sup> Gorbachev's ascension within the CPSU in 1985 was the final nail in the coffin. On top of this came the rivalries of the Sino-Soviet split, which only complicated ideological debates in Congo.

Against this background, the PCT pivoted the country towards a different strategy in the 1980s, which sought to consolidate the state-owned sector while simultaneously loosening administrative restrictions on the private sector and making concessions to foreign capital in the hope of accelerating the technical training of Congolese workers and the transfer of technology. This approach had interesting parallels to China's "reform and opening-up" strategy, which was developed at the same time. Yet Congo's dependency on the capitalist world market was far greater than China's in 1978. This could be seen in the debt trap laid by the West, which forced "structural adjustment" policies upon Brazzaville and thereby undermined the PCT's efforts to defend and strengthen the state sector. In this connection, any reduction in dependency on the capitalist West is necessarily a progressive development for Africa. The advancement of so-called "South-South cooperation" in alliances like BRICS+ has significant potential, despite all contradictions and limitations.

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<sup>86</sup> This thesis needs to be explored in more depth. The IFDDR plans to do so within the framework of the "Friendship!" research platform, which can be found on the website under [ifddr.org](http://ifddr.org).

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