

Les Combattants: The Origins of a Congolese Diaspora Political Protest

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ABSTRACT: *Joseph Kabila's ascension to the presidency of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 2001, following the assassination of his father, Laurent Kabila, coincided with an uptick in political activism among the Congolese diaspora in Western Europe and North America. Between 2004 and 2018, Congolese diaspora political groups and personalities staunchly opposed Joseph Kabila's regime through marches, petitions, boycotts, and even physical aggression against Congolese officials and Kabila's supporters. Over time, these various Congolese diaspora protest groups became known as "Les Combattants". This article examines how the recent political history of DRC led to the emergence of Les Combattants in the Congolese diaspora and the types of claims Les Combattants advanced against the Congolese state and the international community. Considering their geographic spread (in Western Europe and North America), the scope of their claims, and the longevity of their protest, this paper argues that Les Combattants' political resistance signaled a fundamental shift in the way Congolese diaspora political activists interact with the Congolese state.*

KEYWORDS: *Congolese Politics, African Diasporas, Political Resistance, Diaspora Political Mobilization*

INTRODUCTION

Often, research about the Congo overlooks the role the Congolese diaspora plays in Congolese politics. The increase in African Diasporas' political activism since the end of the Cold War suggests that studying African diasporas may reveal pertinent trends in African politics. This paper examines Les Combattants, a Congolese diaspora political resistance movement that emerged in the early 2000s, opposing President Joseph Kabila. Among other arguments, this paper asserts that not only does *Les Combattants'* activism shed light on contemporary Congolese politics, but more importantly, the intensity of *Les Combattants* activism is a relatively new phenomenon in Congolese diaspora politics.

Existing works have addressed how Congolese diasporas remember home (Kabwe and Segatti 2004); how they integrate into host countries (Garbin and Godin, 2013); and how they contribute to development projects in the Congo (Tshibambe, 2007). Garbin and Godin (2013), for example, argue that Congolese diaspora religious affiliations entrench religious differences and contribute to the fragmentation of Congolese diasporic spaces in the United Kingdom and in Belgium. The pertinence of Garbin and Godin's findings is that Congolese diaspora religious groups operate simultaneously as integrating and differentiating mechanisms. However, Garbin and Godin do not tell us whether and how religious affiliations contribute to the formulation of political actions or whether/how religious differences are mitigated or instrumentalized for unified political actions in the Congolese diaspora.

Other researchers have investigated Congolese diasporas' political and economic interactions with Congo. Tshibambe (2007) argues that by 2000, Congolese diasporas

had become more politically involved. Although Tshibambe explains that political support or opposition to the government has become more evident, he does not explain how Congolese diaspora actors construct and sustain a discourse of political engagement. Like Garbin and Godin (2013), Kabwe and Segatti (2004) find paradoxical perceptions of home in the Congolese diasporas. They argue that the notion of home conveys both a sense of immediacy and latency. Although Kabwe and Segatti suggest that there is an interpretive repertoire from which Congolese diasporas construct reality, they do not expound on how that constructed reality translates into political engagement. If the notion of home is ambivalent as Kabwe and Segatti argue, how do Congolese diasporas stabilize differences in their notions of home to build a potentially unifying political discourse?

Available Congolese literature does not satisfactorily inform us about the content of the Congolese diasporas' political engagement. We are not sufficiently informed on the nature of negotiations between different sections of the Congolese diaspora in the development of political actions. We also do not understand the type of political gains Congolese diaspora leaders seek. Moreover, Congolese literature does not sufficiently tell us how and whether host countries influence the diasporic action, or whether and how political parties in the Congo instrumentalize the Congolese diaspora. This article fills the gap by examining the origins of *Les Combattants'* political engagement to discern whether their discourse was primarily a displacement of Congolese politics or whether it indicated shifts in the Congolese diaspora political landscape.

Over the last decade, African diaspora groups have protested presidential electoral outcomes in the Gambia (Stohlman, 2011), Rwanda (Jambo ASBL, 2010), and Zimbabwe (Free and Fair Zimbabwe Elections, 2013). Still, scholars have not yet sufficiently examined the contents of these diasporic contentious political interactions. In studying *Les Combattants*, this paper wishes to clarify how Congolese diaspora political groups interacted with the Congo during Joseph Kabila's presidency (between 2001 and 2018). As a Congolese diaspora protest movement, *Les Combattants* stand out mainly because of the longevity of their protest and the spread of their movement across many geographic regions in Western Europe and North America (Boisselet, 2013).

Examining how Congolese at home and abroad attempt to influence politics is essential. Since the 1990s, socio-political instabilities (Stearns, 2022), the massive presence of Rwandan refugees in eastern Congo in 1994 (Autessere, 2010), the recurrent politico-military involvement of Rwanda and Uganda (Stearns, 2011), Western mining companies' interests in the Congo (Montague, 2002), and multiple Congolese insurgency movements (Rosen, 2012) have dramatically transformed the Congolese political landscape. It is, therefore, essential to examine *Les Combattants'* claims and the types of proposals they advance.

The study of any Congolese diaspora political group requires a clear understanding of the country's political history and the context in which the group emerged. For that

purpose, this paper outlines a brief historical background of Congolese migration to the West and retraces the origins of *Les Combattants*.

The author's interest in this topic emerged during a trip to Belgium in November 2011. The trip coincided with a riot over the 2011 Congolese presidential election; The author's observations of the riots inform parts of this paper. Later, between 2015 and 2018, the author conducted phone, Skype, WhatsApp, and in-person interviews with Congolese diaspora members in the United States, Canada, England, France, and Belgium. Thirty Congolese diaspora participants were interviewed, among whom twenty self-identified as members of *Les Combattants*. All participants were eighteen or older, and only five interviewees were females; the rest were males. Considering the risk Congolese dissidents faced under President Joseph Kabila's regime, participants were selected through snowball sampling, and pseudo-first names were used to protect their identities. However, when authorized, participants' full legal names were used.

CONGOLESE DIASPORAS AND *LES COMBATTANTS*: A RIOT IN BRUSSELS

I am a *combattante* résistante...I am resisting against people who came and told us; "we have come to liberate you from Mobutu's dictatorship." But today, they have become the destroyers of their [own] goal (Tina, a self-identified *Combattante* from Brussels, Belgium).¹

On the evening of December 16, 2011, Belgian police stormed the streets of Matongé, a predominantly African quarter in downtown Brussels. Coincidentally, I was visiting friends and relatives in Brussels when protests over the 2011 Congolese presidential elections turned into a full-blown riot. Rioters loitered on the streets and overturned cars; many among the rioters were arrested that evening.

Belgium, being a democratic country, it was not unusual for discontented groups to take their frustration to the streets. This riot was particularly remarkable; it began as a protest against the 2011 Congolese presidential elections. Furthermore, the riot involved Congolese immigrants who did not and could not vote in Congolese elections. Many protesters might have been *sans papiers* (undocumented), as they are known in France and Belgium (Chrisafis, 2010). Given the precarious existence of undocumented African immigrants in Europe, it was intriguing that some undocumented Congolese would brazenly break the law.

Amid the chaos, "rioters" threw eggs, water bottles, and soda cans at the police. Police retorted with water cannons, pepper spray, baton swings, and handcuffing maneuvers while arresting rioters. Although I had been following *Les Combattants* since 2009, this was my first opportunity to see them in action. Though *Les Combattants'*

¹ Interview with the author, May 18, 2017. Tina was once a political activist in the Congo.

protest was shocking, contentious politics were not a novelty in the history of diasporas. Diverse diaspora organizations have long utilized Western countries as a platform for political resistance against their home countries. In the 1980s for example, Venezuelan, Colombian, and other South American diasporas brought their political struggle to the American public. During the Apartheid regime, South African political opposition leaders took their battle to the streets of London and New York (Lichtenstein, 2007). For a long time, Haitian political dissidents used their position in exile to mobilize support from the US, France, and Canada.

Les Combattants' protest in December 2011 was particularly remarkable because it was the first time in the history of the Congo that diaspora activism reached such intensity. Never had members of the Congolese diaspora so blatantly challenged their government. To be sure, in the 1960s, exiled Congolese political dissidents voiced grievances against the Congolese government. For instance, in the 1960s and 1970s, a small number of Congolese lived in Belgium, and it was relatively easy for the Congolese government to track, co-opt, or assassinate dissidents. One memorable case involved the death of Pierre Kanyonga in Brussels in 1978 (Le Phare, 2013). In Brussels, Kanyonga co-founded the dissident political party Le Mouvement D'Action Pour La Résurrection du Congo (The Movement of Action for the Resurrection of the Congo, or MARC). In August 1978, ninety-one MARC leaders and associates were found guilty of treason by the Congolese government. Many among them were executed (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1978). Pierre Kanyonga and other MARC's associates lived abroad and were condemned in absentia. Coincidentally, a few weeks after his condemnation, Pierre Kanyonga was found dead in Liege, Belgium, killed by a gunshot to the head. The Belgian authorities concluded that Kanyonga had died by accident (The New York Times, 1978); the coincidence was too strong for skeptics to believe the official account.

Moreover, earlier Congolese diaspora political resistance was a mere extension of Congolese domestic politics, fomented by leading Congolese political activists like Kanyonga. Often, those early Congolese diaspora political resistance movements wound down once their leader lost relevance due to cooptation, threats, or assassination. In comparison to earlier Congolese diaspora political resistance, *Les Combattants* stand out particularly due to the longevity, intensity, and geographic spread of their activism. Could *Les Combattants'* resistance indicate fundamental shifts in the Congolese diaspora's political interactions with the Congo?

THE CONGOLESE DIASPORA AND THE ORIGINS OF *LES COMBATTANTS*

From my observation of the December 2011 riot in Brussels, it appeared that *Les Combattants* spoke different Congolese languages and came from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Later, through research and observations of *Les Combattants'* online activism, I found that some of the rioters had been living in Europe since the 1970s and 1980s. In contrast, others defected from Kabila's government. The diversity of Congolese

involved in protests against Kabila's 2011 reelection in Brussels suggested that a strong discourse cemented a sense of collective purpose. What was the content of that discourse? How did *Les Combattants* manage to collapse internal disparities between Congolese groups to establish categorical differences or equivalences between them and the Congolese government? While these questions are important, a serious examination of *Les Combattants'* discourse requires that we consider the socio-historical context that led *Les Combattants* and other Congolese to emigrate to the West in the first place.

Like other African countries, the Congo's post-independence era is characterized by profound sequences of disenchantment (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002), economic instability (Nest, Grignon, and Kisangani, 2008), institutional failure (Packham, 1998), and armed conflicts (Turner, 2007). In the wake of the 1960s independence movements, many disfranchised African political actors, intellectuals, businesspeople, artists, and military officers left their countries. The peculiarity of the Congo is that in each decade following independence, successive political and economic turmoil pushed massive numbers of Congolese out of the country.

For instance, rebellions and socio-economic chaos characterized the 1960s. The brutal assassination of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba unleashed waves of political violence and forced many Congolese into exile. The political uncertainties of the 1960s carried over to the 1970s. Political repression and poor economic policies of the 1970s forced Congolese to fend for themselves in neighboring countries, Western Europe, and North America. Consequently, squeezed between political oppression, inefficient economic policies, and armed conflicts, Congolese civilians and political dissidents have been leaving the country since the 1960s.

By the beginning of the 1980s, the remnants of the 1960s rebel movements, including Laurent Kabila, reorganized and attacked a few territories in the peripheral eastern regions of the Congo (Stearns, 2011). Unable to threaten the state, the 1980s insurgent groups gave Mobutu's regime even more leverage to hold on to power. In addition, the 1980s' structural adjustment policies, pushed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, imposed austerity measures on developing countries and encouraged even more emigration.

The end of the Cold War in 1989 led to an upsurge in democratic movements across African countries, coinciding with unprecedented regional instability and protracted armed conflicts. We recall that the 1990s was the decade of the Rwandan Genocide, the Burundian, Liberian, and Sierra Leonean civil wars, and the Congolese civil wars (dubbed the "African World War"). In the specific case of the Congo, the 1990s began with a series of popular uprisings in 1991 and 1992, during which large cities, including Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, and Kisangani (the three largest cities in the DRC), were looted.

The unstable economic and political environment of the 1980s paved the way for the 1996 rebellion that propelled Laurent Kabila to power. The year 1997 marked the end of thirty-two years of President Mobutu's repressive regime and the beginning of

generalized political violence in Congo. By the 2000s, the Congo had become a theater of multiple insurgencies involving Angolan, Ugandan, Rwandan, and Burundian troops, among others. Between 1998 and 2008, about 5.4 million Congolese died because of armed conflicts (IRC, 2008). In 2015, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that over 467,000 Congolese lived in refugee camps outside of the Congo (UNHCR, 2015). Due to multiple waves of political and economic instability from the 1960s to the 2000s, Congolese populations have felt a constant push and pull to leave the country: poor economic policies, political repression, protracted armed conflicts, and the promise of a better future abroad have led many Congolese to leave the country. While most Africans and Congolese who emigrate settle in other African countries, by the mid-2010s, over 150,000 Congolese had settled in Western Countries (Flahaux and Schoumaker, 2016). Over the years, Congolese have established diaspora networks in Europe, North America, and even Australia.

THE RWANDAN GENOCIDE, LAURENT KABILA, JOSEPH KABILA, AND *LES COMBATTANTS*

Do you know why I left the Congo? I left the Congo because after traveling in different parts of Congo, it occurred to me that the Congo no longer belongs to us. An observation of the people who occupy the highest positions in the country will reveal that those who are leading us are, for the most part Rwandans and Ugandans; their subordinates are Congolese (Simon, a *Combattant*, living in Brussels, Belgium)².

As a group of Congolese living abroad, *Les Combattants'* attempt to influence Congolese domestic politics could only be achieved through globalization tools and transnational networks. An examination of available literature and online resources, as well as interviews with some of *Les Combattants* and other Congolese in the US, Canada, France, and Belgium, suggests that many among *Les Combattants* left the Congo in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s³. The recent history of the Congo indicates that socio-political unraveling, spillovers of regional conflicts (especially the 1994 Rwandan genocide), outcomes of the 1980s' structural adjustment, and international political shifts following the end of the Cold War pushed massive numbers of Congolese out of the country. And because many African countries experienced domestic socio-political instability in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, they were unable to integrate all African immigrants and

² Telephone interview with the author, January 19, 2017.

³ Personal communication with *Les Combattants* members between, August 2015 and May 2018.

refugees into their societies effectively. Thus, instead of settling in African countries, many Africans, including Congolese, migrated to the West as political exiles, economic migrants, and resettled refugees.

Considering persistent instabilities in the recent history of Congo, it is fair to suggest that Congolese who migrated to the West since the 1960s, including *Les Combattants*, are largely conflict-induced diasporas. They are comprised of three main categories: 1) war victims, 2) economic refugees, and 3) political exiles. Hence, it is fitting to suggest that *Les Combattants* harbored grievances towards the Congolese state. Given the relatively low socio-political and economic cost of challenging repressive regimes from abroad, *Les Combattants* and other Congolese in the diaspora had the leverage to criticize President Kabila than Congolese who lived in Congo. For this reason, Congolese diaspora political entrepreneurs became even more vocal and defiant after the assassination of Laurent-Desire Kabila in 2001 and the subsequent inauguration of Joseph Kabila as president.

There is a through line between the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the Congolese 1996 rebellion, the assassination of Laurent Kabila, the ascension of Joseph Kabila to power, and the rise of *Les Combattants*. Scholars of the African Great Lakes region, such as Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002) and Stearn (2011), have argued that Rwanda and Uganda organized and funded the 1996 Congolese rebellion. As a strategy to address threats coming from Rwandan Hutu refugees based in Eastern Congo, Rwanda and Uganda assembled groupings of Congolese opposition and insurgent leaders, including Laurent Kabila, to form the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of the Congo (AFDL). In October 1996, Rwanda, Uganda, and the AFDL attacked the Congo and began to dismantle Rwandan refugee camps in eastern Congo.

Though most Congolese were hopeful when the AFDL took power in May 1997, many resented the overwhelming presence of Rwandan and Ugandan troops in Congo. In August 1998, thirteen months after the ousting of President Mobutu, Rwanda and Uganda's alliance with AFDL fell apart, and the second Congolese civil war began. This time, however, Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Chad aligned with Congo, while Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi sided with Congolese insurgent groups. The conflict was so confusing that in 2000, Rwandan and Ugandan soldiers fought each other in the town of Kisangani for six days. The patterns of alliance formation and defection among Congolese insurgent groups puzzled observers. Even more puzzling, on January 16, 2001, Laurent Kabila was assassinated in his palace in Kinshasa, allegedly by Rashidi Kasereka, his bodyguard. Kasereka was shot dead on the spot.

Joseph Kabila Becomes President in 2001

"...We are making the case that our country is occupied."⁴

Following Laurent Kabila's assassination in 2001, Joseph Kabila assumed power secretly. Joseph Kabila's ascendance to power brought some hope for peace negotiations (Quiring, 2003, and Herman and Peterson, 2010). At the time of Laurent Kabila's assassination, Joseph Kabila was the commander of the Congolese Terrestrial Forces. He had worked with his father since the early days of the 1996 rebellion and was familiar with the Ugandan and the Rwandan sides of the conflict. Unfortunately, Joseph Kabila's ascent to power did not change the tide in the Congolese crisis: millions of Congolese continued to be killed and displaced while local, national, and regional armed groups engaged in protracted armed conflicts (Autesserre, 2012). In addition, the United Nations Mission in the Congo (MONUC), which had been entrusted with overseeing and preserving peacekeeping operations since 1999, was failing (Khadiagala, 2006). On multiple occasions in northeastern Congo, for example, in cities such as Kisangani, Bunia, Goma, and Bukavu, Congolese people continued to be displaced or killed despite the MONUC peacekeepers' presence (Nest and Kisangani, 2008, and Stearns, 2011).

When Joseph Kabila ascended to power in 2001, three competing politico-military forces controlled the Congolese territory.⁵ The government, led by Joseph Kabila, controlled the south and a large part of the west. Two insurgent groups controlled the rest of the country: the Congolese Rally for Democracy-National (RCD-National) controlled the east, and the Congolese Rally for Democracy-Liberation Movement (RCD-ML), led by Jean-Pierre Bemba, controlled the north-east. Although Rwanda and Uganda were actively involved in the conflict, no severe international sanctions were levied against them. This is, for instance, how Remy, a 57-year-old *Combattante* from

⁴ Author's Skype conversation with Nicholas, a *Combattant* from Brussels, Belgium. January 19, 2017.

⁵ By 2001, the Congo experienced a plethora of insurgent movements. For instance in the north-east, in the Bunia area alone, Human Rights Watch (2005) reported that there were at least seven main armed groups, including the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC), the National and Integrationist Front (FNI), the People's Armed Forces of Congo (FAPC), the Party for Unity and Safeguard for the Integrity of Congo (PUSIC), the Patriotic Forces Ituri (FRPI), the Congolese Rally for Democracy-National (RCD-National), and the Congolese Rally for Democracy-Liberation Movement (RCD-ML). Although Rwanda, Uganda, and even Kabila's government backed many of these armed factions (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002), such a rapid proliferation of insurgencies and their disastrous human and environmental implications increased indignation in Congolese diaspora communities.

Richmond, Virginia, illustrates *Les Combattants'* frustrations with the United States in relation to Rwanda's role in Congo.

The Clintons [President Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton] have contributed to the trouble in Congo. They have assisted Kagame and Museveni to impose a foreign power in the country. Congolese are not stupid; we know what is going on.⁶

Robert Mbelo, a *Combattant* from London, England, expressed a similar viewpoint when he told me during a Skype interview:

Rwandans are in the Congo for the profit of Western multinationals. They [Western multinationals] are the ones who are behind Rwandans... They [Rwandans] invaded us for no other reasons but for our natural resources.⁷

On the contrary, Uganda, particularly Rwanda, was acclaimed as a development and human rights model in the region. In 2009, President Paul Kagame received the Global Citizen Award from the Bill Clinton Foundation for his achievements in securing peace and economic progress (Nambi, 2009). Hence, when Joseph Kabila took power in 2001, paradoxes in domestic, regional, and international affairs weakened further prospects for peace and stability in Congo.

Joseph Kabila's undemocratic access to power and the international recognition and support he garnered at the beginning of his administration demonstrated that in Congo, the legitimacy of the presidency depended on external political arrangements beyond the will of the Congolese people. The apparent readiness with which Joseph Kabila was initially accepted in the West (see Quiring, 2003) led many Congolese in the diaspora to believe that there was an international conspiracy that gave Rwanda and Uganda a "green light" to invade, occupy, and exploit the Congo (Carayanis, 2006 and Bolya, 2012). As thousands of Congolese were killed, internally dispersed, or scattered around in refugee camps, rebel movements sponsored by Rwanda continued to operate in eastern Congo (Reyntjens, 2004). And powerful international actors continued to suppress evidence that associated Rwanda with killings in the Congo (Demart and

⁶ Phone interview with the author, June 3, 2017. Remy participated in conferences and different meetings organized by *Les Combattants* and other Congolese diaspora groups in Washington, D.C.

⁷ Personal communications with the author, June-September 2017. Robert Mbelo is a member of the Congolese diaspora living in London. Mbelo was a diplomat under Mobutu for many years. He self-identifies as a *Combattant*. He has published many of his opinions on different online outlets. Mbelo authorized the author to quote him on record.

Bodeux, 2013, and BBC, 2014). Meanwhile, Rwanda became the model of development and political reform in the region. Aware of this international schizophrenia, by the mid-2000s, Congolese diaspora groups took it to the streets of London, Paris, Washington, D.C., and Brussels to bring attention to the Congolese crisis and to protest the Congolese government and the international community's unwillingness to sanction Uganda and Rwanda.

By 2004, Congolese diaspora organizations and protest groups in Belgium, France, and England began adopting similar slogans and claims. Initially, different names were associated with Congolese diaspora protests, including *Bana Kongo* ("Congo's children" in Lingala), *Congolais Résistants* (Congolese Resisters), and *Congolais Patriotes* (Congolese Patriots). With time, *Les Combattants* became a prominent umbrella, representing Congolese diaspora groups protesting against Joseph Kabila and armed conflicts in the Congo (Bolya, 2012 and Demart and Bodeux, 2013).

Also, at the beginning of the 2000s, Honoré Ngbanda, an exiled Mobutu's official, began to write against Rwanda's "occupation" of Congo. Ngbanda (2004) argued that the Congo was under occupation and in danger of balkanization. In addition, Ngbanda and other Congolese in the diaspora claimed that Rwanda had expansionist interests in Congo (Bofala, 2017) rather than address security threats posed by Rwandan rebels.⁸ Furthermore, many among the Congolese diaspora alleged that the international community and multinational mining companies condoned the aggression of the Congo by Rwanda and Uganda. In June 2005, the Alliance des Patriotes Pour La Refondation du Congo (the Alliance of Patriots for the Re-foundation of the Congo or APARECO)⁹ was founded in France under the leadership of Ngbanda. Very quickly, APARECO became an important voice for Congolese diaspora political activists, including *Les Combattants*.

Thus, *Les Combattants* emerged as a contestation against the Congolese government during Joseph Kabila's presidency (Boibhouvier, 2012). It is less likely that their political resistance would have evolved as it did had Joseph Kabila lost the 2006 presidential race. The outcomes of the 2006 presidential election emboldened the *Les Combattants* movement. Amid outcries of electoral irregularities, Joseph Kabila won the presidency. At the same time, Jean-Pierre Bemba, "*mwana mboka*" ("the son of the soil,"

⁸ The official reason as to why Rwanda and Uganda invaded the Congo in 1996 was the presence of Hutu Interahamwe in eastern Congo. Through the years, the Rwandan government has justified its military involvements in the Congo as an attempt to stop and prevent Hutu rebels' attacks from eastern Congo.

⁹ Since 2005, APARECO has spread in many parts of Europe, the US and even South Africa.

in Lingala)¹⁰ lost the elections despite his popularity, especially in Kinshasa (Carayanis, 2008). Although many international observers acknowledged multiple instances of electoral irregularities in 2006, Kabila found strong support in France, England, England, and Belgium (Stearns, 2011). By this time, many Congolese in the diaspora began questioning Kabila's citizenship. They argued that Kabila was a Rwandan subject at the services of Paul Kagame (Kazadi, 2015). Ultimately, the allegations of rigged presidential elections, the international silence about Rwanda and Uganda's recurrent military involvements in Congo, and the claim that Kabila was not a Congolese citizen helped to push *Les Combattants'* claims toward nationalistic fringes.

After losing his presidential bid, Jean-Pierre Bemba became a senator. However, Bemba's popularity and proven ability to organize an armed insurgency threatened the fragile Congolese peace. Coincidentally, in 2008, the International Criminal Court (ICC) indicted and arrested Jean-Pierre Bemba under the allegations that his troops had committed war crimes in the Central African Republic between 2002 and 2003. Bemba's troops had been assisting the crumbling regime of Ange-Félix Patassé in his fight against François Bozizé's insurgency. Eventually, Bozizé's insurgency prevailed and deposed Patassé while Bemba's troops returned home to fight their own battles.

Many Congolese in the diaspora were suspicious of the swiftness with which the ICC arrested Bemba. For instance, Robert Mbelo, the former diplomat turned *Combattant*, explained during a Skype conversation, "Bemba's arrest was illegal since he was a sitting senator whose diplomatic immunity was never lifted." Moreover, it seemed to *Les Combattants* and other observers that the ICC was selectively picking and choosing amongst so-called war criminals (mainly in Africa) yet giving a free pass to other suspects of war crimes such as Paul Kagame and the Rwandan Patriotic Front officials (see Carayanis, 2008).

ÉTIENNE TSHISEKEDI AND THE 2011 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

In 2011 we were expecting and hoping that Tshisekedi would win the elections, but they stole it from us. Kabila violated the constitution. Étienne Tshisekedi was the real winner...the elections were rigged, that is why Tshisekedi opposed the results (Fiston, a *Combattant*, residing in Baltimore, Maryland)¹¹.

¹⁰ In the 2006 presidential elections, Congolese who opposed Joseph Kabila referred to Jean-Pierre Bemba as "*mwana mboka*" as a way of questioning Kabila's citizenship and disqualifying his bid for the presidency.

¹¹ Interview with the author, March 28, 2016. A trained statistician, Fiston identifies as a *Combattant*, he left the Congo in 1998. Fiston lives now in Baltimore. MD.

To effectively appraise *Les Combattants'* post-electoral protest in 2011, we need to understand the role Étienne Tshisekedi played in Congolese politics. A long-time politician, in 1980 Tshisekedi co-founded the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS), an opposition political party. Between the 1980s and 1990s, Tshisekedi became the main figure of the Congolese political opposition, but he also embodied the contradictions of Congolese politics. Tshisekedi was propelled into Congolese national politics in the early 1960s when Mobutu dissolved the government and placed *Le College des Commissaires Généraux*, a 35 members group, in charge of the country, as a step toward an eventual coup d'état. As one of the *Commissaires Généraux*, Tshisekedi was the Assistant *Commissaire Général* for the Justice Department. Being the second-highest ranking member of the Justice Department, Tshisekedi might have been involved in the arrest of Prime Minister Patrice Emery Lumumba (see Bustin, 2002; Mpisi, 2008; and De Witte, 2000). When Mobutu finally took power in 1965, Tshisekedi was an elected representative of the district of Kabinda in East Kasai. Between 1965 and 1980, Tshisekedi occupied diverse functions in Mobutu's regime: including General Director for the National School of Law, Minister of Interior, General Prosecutor, and Vice President of the National Assembly. In 1980, Tshisekedi and twelve other Congolese parliamentarians (ever since remembered as *Les Treize Parlementaires* in Congolese political history) wrote an open letter to Mobutu. *Les Treize Parlementaires* criticized Mobutu's regime and demanded that Zairian politics be opened to democratic participation (Mpunga, 2007 and Cros, 2017).

Following *Les Treize Parlementaires'* open letter to President Mobutu, Tshisekedi re-entered Congolese politics as a defender of democracy. Between 1980 and 1990, the UDPS challenged the only authorized political party, the Popular Revolutionary Movement (MPR). Despite many arrests and abuses Tshisekedi endured under Mobutu, the UDPS continued to operate covertly and overtly until Laurent Kabila took power on May 17, 1997.

Upon Laurent Kabila's ascent to power, Tshisekedi had nothing to oppose or contest, chiefly because Kabila had no administrative record to criticize. A year after the takeover, Laurent Kabila's coalition with Paul Kagame and Yoweri Museveni fell apart. Now Kabila had to fight enemies who were once his trusted backers. As Kabila secured military help from Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Libya, and Chad to fight the new Rwanda-Uganda-supported insurgencies at the beginning of the second Congolese civil war in 1998, Tshisekedi lost political relevance. Following the assassination of Laurent Kabila in 2001 and the subsequent bitter transition under Joseph Kabila, the Congo held a presidential election in 2006. Tshisekedi protested the 2006 presidential election and asked Congolese not to vote, citing allegations that the electoral processes were rigged (see Trefon 2011 and Cranayis, 2010). In 2006, amid controversial results, Kabila was elected president, defeating Jean-Pierre Bemba in the runoff.

CONCLUSION

Les Combattants' protests emerged as a response to President Kabila's government. By 2004, Congolese communities in London, Brussels, Paris, Montreal, Washington D.C., and elsewhere in the West began to denounce the Congolese government, Rwanda's activities in Congo, and the silence of the international community. However, operating from multiple Western countries and using various strategies, *Les Combattants* remained an amalgam of decentralized political networks (Cros, 2013). Though *Les Combattants'* ire was primarily directed at Joseph Kabila, this unprecedented political mobilization of Congolese in the Diasporas signaled important shifts in the interactions between the Congolese state and its diasporas. This shift is expressed when Fedo¹², a *Combattant* from Louisville, Kentucky, explained in February 2016:

I think the time has come. Whether Kabila leaves today or tomorrow, we are on a good trajectory; woe to whoever comes after Kabila. After Mobutu, we did not have this kind of [political] consciousness; all we wanted was for Mobutu to go. When Mobutu left, we stumbled.¹³

After everything we have seen in the last twenty years, now this is when the true post-Mobutu era begins. *Les Combattants'* strategies, including online activism, protests (Ilunga, 2013), lobbying (Demont, 2008), intimidation of Congolese officials and Kabila's sympathizers (France 24, 2012), as well as the boycotts of Congolese musicians in European venues (Ngandu, 2012), tell us that Congolese diaspora groups have found multiple mechanisms by which to challenge the Congolese state, mobilize Congolese abroad, and appeal to the goodwill of Western countries. If efficiently organized, Congolese diaspora activists could pressure the international community and successfully place policy demands on the Congolese government. The reverse is also possible. *Les Combattants'* political resistance shows that with some political will, it may be possible for the Congolese government to utilize Congolese diaspora activists as foreign policy instruments. Of course, this will require the Congolese state to mend its relationship with its diaspora.

Indeed, further research is needed to elucidate how these changes may impact future relations between the Congolese state and its diaspora. In fact, since the election of Félix Tshisekedi in 2018, Congolese diaspora political activists have continued to criticize the Congolese government, instability in eastern regions, and Rwanda's involvement in Congo. This may suggest that political activism within the Congolese diaspora will persist in the foreseeable future.

¹² Interview with the author, February 5, 2016.

¹³ Fedo refers to the idea that Laurent Kabila did not ascend to power by the will of the Congolese people.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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