

Experience and conception of people's power in Democratic Republic Congo

Given the subject of this conference, "the left's conception of democracy in Africa: tasks and challenges" I want to explain the relevant experience of the government of Laurent Kabila between 1999 and 2001, as we understand it.

When, after the first wave of American-Rwandan-Ugandan aggression war was brought to a halt, Laurent Kabila made his two major speeches on the *Comités du Pouvoir Populaire* (committees for People's power), in January and April 1999, many thought he was just improvising. Laurent Kabila had however actually just returned to a key idea of the *Conseil National de Libération* that led the revolutionary war of resistance of 1964-1965. In the program of April 5, 1964, the CNL formulated its objectives as follows: "Restore popular sovereignty; regain national independence, restore freedom and national democracy, restore the heritage and national wealth to the sovereign people and the workers, establish a revolutionary, national and popular government." The idea of national and people's power is as old as the Congolese revolution. In the jungle of Pierre Mulele, in 1964-1968, the liberated villages were headed by a ... Committee of People's Power!

To achieve its objectives, the CNL defined its political line in terms that can be found repeatedly in the speeches of Comrade Laurent Kabila's from 17 May 1997 until his assassination: "In domestic policy: breaking the grip of the imperialist yoke of the USA to allow a free and democratic national life, and guarantee the territorial and administrative unity of the Congo." "On the economic and social level: ensure and raise the living standards of the masses, develop the national economy based on science experiments under way in the world (that is to say, the socialist countries), plan domestic production and control, open the doors of knowledge and culture to all children of the people irrespective of sex."

In his speeches on the CPP, Laurent Kabila insisted on two basic choices.

First: Keep the old repressive state in the service of foreign interests or create an independent state in the service of the Congolese people?

Second: Maintain an export-oriented economy, dominated by multinationals, or build a strong national and decolonized economy?

1. On the first question I quote Kabila: "Leopold II's Congo Free State existed to collect rubber. The whip was daily. They looted and pillaged. They are gone and we were treated to another state, one with at its head Congolese people, but they were agents of external powers. The mission of this State was to punish always, everywhere. Under Mobutu, the country had an anti-people State, a State whose mission was to protect foreign interests. The result was extreme poverty everywhere, a damaged and extraverted economy. (...) This comprador state has lasted too long. It has created a culture, habits in the field of production, of thought, in the behavior of citizens."

But to create a fundamentally different state apparatus from what the Congo had endured between 1885 and 1997 is a daunting task and takes a lot of time. The key concept is a radical break with the past. In his speech, Kabila spoke very clearly on this: "On May 17, 1997, power was at the gunpoint of those who have been applauded by the masses, who hunted down the last strongholds of Mobutu's crumbling power". "The liquidation of neocolonialist Mobutu was a necessary step that allowed the masses to have access now to the leadership of public affairs."

Kabila said: "It is necessary to create a popular state, a state of the people, a state that thinks first and foremost about the interests of the Congo. Now we have to organize the people to take their destiny in hand. Organizing the people means continuing mobilization and putting them in power. CPPs are the people organized into organs of popular state power, they exercise direct management of public affairs at every level of government, pursuing a single goal: to be the undisputed masters of their destiny. You do not have any master anymore. The people are the only master."

2. The popular state, radically opposed to the neo-colonial state, has as main objective the economic decolonization of Congo, building a strong national economy, the creation of a just society without exploitation. "We must create a new economy for our country. This is the objective of the people's state. The time has come to build a thriving national economy. We should produce vehicles ourselves. Where is our heavy industry? It is the mission of the state of the people, the mission of the people organized in the People's Power Committees to create a strong economy for us to enforce respect. So our mission is to create a domestic industry. When we took office, it was to do that. "The CPPs must be understood as a gigantic national patriotic movement. The Congolese coalesce around a very noble ideal. We will create a new society, just and prosperous, through a strategy: the mobilization of the entire people around national reconstruction."

Laurent-Desire Kabila remained all his life in the line of the people's struggle for independence, socialism and peace. This revolutionary creed, he sang in his Hymn of the Oppressed: "The CPP are the light of the workers and peasants, as well as all other oppressed people. There is no doubt about destroying exploitation and creating a just society." Kabila is thus the voice of the exploited and oppressed workers and peasants whose aim is "to bring down the exploitation" of man by man, which in the Marxist literature is called "creating a just socialist society".

Thanks to the mobilization of the Congolese people through the CPP and through a Pan-African front where the governments of Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe played an important role, Laurent Kabila was able to halt the Rwando-Ugandan-American aggression, and by December 2000 he could even force the governments of Rwanda and Uganda to conclude bilateral agreements for the withdrawal of their troops. But on January 16, 2001 Mzee Kabila was assassinated. Congolese nationalists were obliged to switch to a defensive strategy and the CPP were abolished two years later.

Why could this form of popular democracy not survive?

In the world of imperialist "globalization" today, one "private" company such as General Electrics has assets worth 782 billion dollars. How can you have democracy in the Congo, a country which in 2009 had a gross domestic product of about 11 billion dollars if the country has a neocolonial regime in which General Electrics and other multinational companies dictate the law through the orders of the IMF, the World Bank and the governments of the U.S., Canada and Europe?

In this world to decide for effective democracy for the working masses means making a class choice against the bourgeoisie. Do we want to maintain a democracy where the power of money, the power of the old neo-colonial state and direct and indirect foreign interventions decide the outcome of elections? Or do we decide to organize a new democracy, which gives the masses, the poor, effective means to impose the choice of the overwhelming majority? Is it possible to make the latter choice and give a resolute orientation to the struggle without a Marxist vanguard party?

The PRP of Laurent Kabila was such a Marxist party. But since the eighties, however, this party was without leadership because of the bloody repression against the maquis of Fizi Baraka. The majority of the cadres with whom Laurent Kabila had led this Communist Party, were assassinated. When the war of

liberation began in October 1996, events followed so quickly and put in front of Laurent Kabila such important immediate tasks of management of the war and the state that it was impossible for him to rebuild the party. But could the popular democracy of the CPP be achieved in a sustainable way without a party which had interpret the line developed by Laurent Kabila through criticism of the old beliefs and attitudes inherited from 37 years of neo-colonialism?

Our comrade Ludo Martens experienced this attempt at people's democracy closely, and he noted that a long-term educational work would have been necessary to let Kabila's views penetrate at all levels of the CPPs. It was also clear that Laurent Kabila, in person played the role of Headquarters of both class struggle and front work in the Congo, a role normally occupied by an entire party. That was very clear when after the death of Mzee Kabila, there were no forces actively working for the continuation and deepening of popular democracy.

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