Mobutu Sese Seko

INTRODUCTION

Mobutu Sese Seko (1930-1997), president of Zaire, who seized power by force in 1965 and held it for more than three decades. Mobutu kept a chokehold on political power, amassing vast amounts of wealth while his country collapsed. After Mobutu was overthrown in 1997, Zaire was renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

EARLY LIFE AND CAREER

Born Joseph Désiré Mobutu in Lisala in the north of the former Belgian colony of Belgian Congo, Mobutu was educated in missionary schools. Joining the Belgian colonial army at age 19, he rose to the rank of sergeant-major, the highest rank open to Africans. In the late 1950s, as the colony moved toward independence, he worked as a journalist and joined the Congolese National Movement of militant nationalist Patrice Lumumba. The country achieved independence in June 1960 as the Republic of the Congo (it would be renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1964) with Lumumba as prime minister. Lumumba chose Mobutu as his private secretary and soon afterward named him army chief of staff.

The immediate postindependence era was marked by turmoil. In less than a week the army mutinied against its officer corps, which was still composed entirely of Belgians. The southern province of Katanga seceded less than a month later, and a power struggle quickly developed between Lumumba and President Joseph Kasavubu. Lumumba fell into disfavor with Western nations after making entreaties for help to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In September 1960 29-year-old Mobutu, backed by the army, suspended the unstable government and placed Lumumba under house arrest. Lumumba was murdered shortly afterward, in January 1961. Evidence later implicated Mobutu and the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in setting up the murder. Mobutu nominally turned power over to Kasavubu and fought the secession of Katanga, which was put down in 1963. In November 1965, backed by the army, Mobutu staged a second coup. Declaring himself president, he abolished the office of prime minister and canceled elections scheduled for 1966. In 1970 Mobutu established the Popular Movement of the Revolution (MPR) as the sole political party, which all citizens were obliged to join. In 1970 Mobutu, running unopposed, was elected president.

THE RULE OF THE “ALL-POWERFUL WARRIOR”

As president, Mobutu sought to foster a cult of personality revolving around his stature as a hero and a leader. Stressing a “return to African authenticity,” Mobutu renamed the country Zaire in 1971, after an old, supposedly more authentic local name for the Congo River. He changed his name to Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu wa za Banga (officially translated as 'the all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, will go from conquest to conquest leaving fire in his wake.') Banning European names and dress, he began to wear his signature leopard-skin hat. Credited with developing a sense of unity among the diverse ethnic groups, he promoted the use of four African languages (Lingala, Swahili, Kikongo, and Tshiluba) to

complement the official language, French. Under a 1973 'Zairianization' policy, his government seized about 2000 foreign-owned businesses. Most were distributed within Mobutu’s inner circle. Many of these businesses failed because of the new owners' inexperience. Nevertheless, Western nations backed Mobutu's regime as a bulwark against the spread of communism in Central Africa. In return for military support in quashing rebellions in Zaire, Mobutu allowed Western nations to use Zaire as a base for covert operations against communist forces in neighboring countries. The most notable example of this was the CIA’s support for Angolan rebels operating out of southern Zaire.

One of Africa's most tenacious dictators, Mobutu crushed political dissent, executing rivals he saw as threats. He suppressed rebellions in 1977 and 1978 with the help of Moroccan and Belgian troops and American and French military assistance. His political opponents formed the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS) in 1982, but the party’s leaders were continually harassed and imprisoned throughout the 1980s. Mobutu consolidated his power by sharing the country’s wealth with political allies, a system often described as a kleptocracy. Reportedly absconding with billions of dollars in Western aid and export earnings generated by the country's mineral wealth, Mobutu amassed a vast personal fortune, believed to have peaked at $4 billion in the mid-1980s. Meanwhile a potentially wealthy country, plagued with corruption and mismanagement, suffered economic ruin.

In the late 1980s, as the ideological and geopolitical struggle between Western nations and communist nations known as the Cold War diminished, Mobutu became less significant to his Western allies. In October 1990 the Congress of the United States cut direct aid to Mobutu's regime because of corruption and human rights abuses. Under domestic and international pressure for reform, Mobutu announced the creation of a multiparty system in 1991. However, he shrewdly sidestepped any real progress towards free multiparty elections. In 1991 and 1992 Mobutu wrangled with a conference organized to draft a new constitution and organize elections. Throughout the early and mid-1990s Mobutu, then suffering from prostate cancer, continued to cling to power, despite rising opposition and economic disaster. He began spending most of his time away from the capital, Kinshasa, at a palace he had built near his northern ancestral village of Gbadolite.

I MOBUTU’S V FALL

In late 1996 a small ethnic rebellion in eastern Zaire suddenly expanded, routing Zaire’s underfunded and poorly disciplined army. Led by veteran guerrilla fighter Laurent-Désiré Kabila and supported by several neighboring countries, including Angola and Rwanda, the rebellion soon developed into an anti-Mobutu revolution. Meanwhile Mobutu left the country to undergo medical treatment in France, Switzerland, and Monaco. Despite the government’s hiring of foreign mercenaries, by the time Mobutu returned to Zaire in March 1997 the rebels had captured most of eastern Zaire and were rapidly pushing west toward Kinshasa.

Days before Kabila’s capture of Kinshasa in May 1997 Mobutu relinquished power and fled the country. Increased expenses were believed to have reduced his wealth; however, he still owned luxury residences and real estate in Morocco, in South Africa, and throughout Europe. Having ruled with an iron grip for nearly 32 years, he died in exile in Rabat, Morocco, in September 1997. Impoverished and unstable, the Congo remains in the grip of his legacy.