

12 MOBUTU: THE POWER AND THE GLORY Joseph-Désiré Mo formidable dema

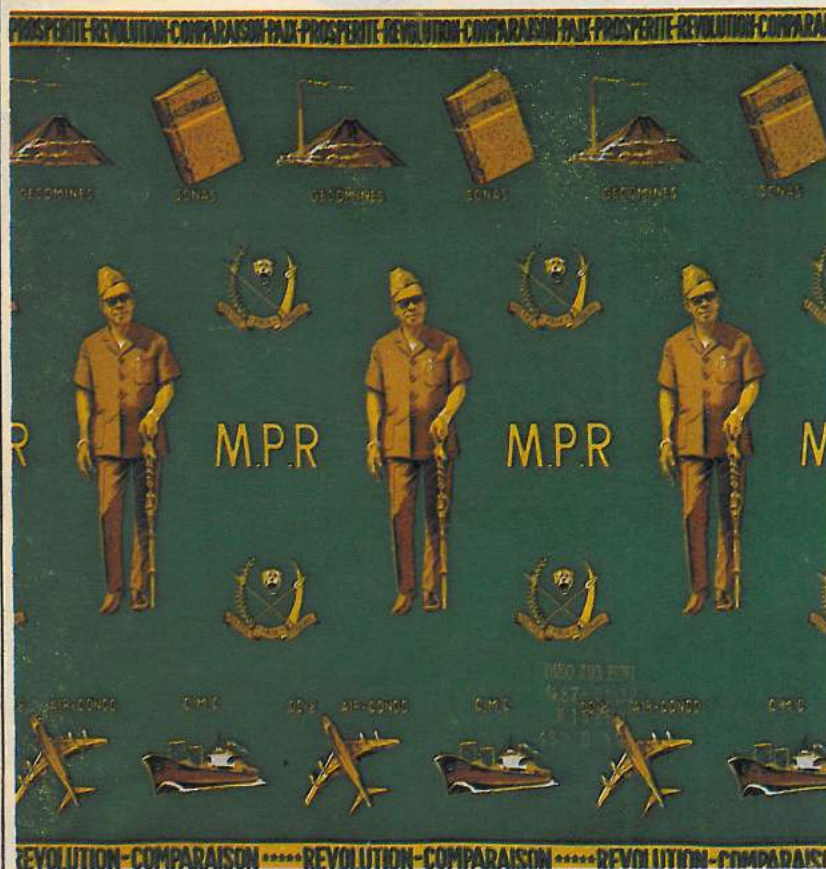
butu, President of Zaire (Congo-Kinshasa)—left, beside his wife Marie-Antoinette—has become one of black Africa's most gogues, and has turned his arbitrary and lonely rule into a personality cult. A profile by *James Fox*; photographs by *Colin Jones* 13



The languid harmonies of *soucouss* (left) are the Congo's life blood, and provide much of black Africa with music. Bars like the Parafifi in Dendale (below), a Kinshasa suburb, are packed nightly with dancing couples. Before Mobutu, musicians could make or break a politician. Now they sing Mobutu's praises



Unmarried girls - '*femmes libres*' (right) - dressed in the universal fashion of all Congolese city girls. In Kinshasa they outnumber men by five to three. Morality is strict - married women rarely go dancing without husbands. Mobutu makes a point of referring to women separately in his speeches "Congolais et Congolaises" and has made their emancipation a political priority



Mobutu projects his personality with massive propaganda as leader of the MPR (above) - Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution - the only official party; the print also celebrates the nationalisation of the Katanga mines. The Israeli trained paracommandos (right) are hand-picked for their loyalty to Mobutu's cause



Outside the Memling hotel in Kinshasa a triptych of neon-illuminated posters glows day and night telling the tale of General Joseph-Désiré Mobutu's triumph. One picture shows the Congo put to the sword, exploding in flames after independence. Next is Mobutu's military coup in 1965. The third is Mobutu and Continuity. He had already been in power for two years when the last white mercenaries retreated into Ruanda in the face of almost the whole Congolese army in 1967. The Congo has not been such big news since those last days of bloodletting, and the years of Lumumba, Tshombe and Katanga.

In the meantime Mobutu has become one of the most formidable and fascinating demagogues that black Africa has produced - and one

of the richest and most deliberately glamorous. At Kinshasa airport you get a warning of his considerable authority, the face staring out from the official portraits with a petulant and menacing expression. There are blown up colour pictures showing the heavy gold chain hanging off his wrist - his trademark, like Kenyatta's fly-whisk and Kaunda's cravats.

There, under Mobutu's stare, you will as likely as not get taken for a few dollars, and the action is very fast. Mobutu is said once to have invited a journalist back to the Congo because he believed his unfavourable impressions were the result of getting fleeced on arrival at the airport. I began peeling off currency to pay the obligatory handouts, since this was no time to argue, first to the official who seized my passport and took it to the front

of the queue. Next, to the customs man who feigned astonishment at uncovering our camera equipment and told us we were way over the odds. The word for the Congolese version of this tropical venality is *matabish*, and when employed the stigma of bribery is magically wiped away and it becomes instead a gesture of goodwill.

Mobutu has made skilful use of the system of *matabish* in the shrewd and often ruthless political balancing act that has kept him in power for six years. To have been in power for so long in the Congo, given its turbulent history, is something of a political miracle, and if Mobutu's methods have not been admirable, he is at least to be given credit for sparing his country from the terrible ordeal of bloodshed and civil war that marked

the early years of independence, and seemed to be endless and uncontrollable. He performed this feat by stepping in with a bloodless coup in 1965 and proclaiming himself the sole political arbitrator. The cause of the Congo's destruction was politics, and Mobutu abolished them. His gradual progress towards an unchallenged control over this vast and rich country has shown him at times to be a tough and unscrupulous strong-arm man. The experience has left him isolated and suspicious, and some say he is tortured with guilt and remorse for the deaths of his purged rivals and former friends.

The remorse has been interpreted as Mobutu's warrior ancestry working against his Catholic faith. It came to light when he changed the country's name to Zaire Republic and, in

the cause of "Zaire authenticity", dropped the Joseph Désiré from his own name and assumed a dazzling array of titles, some of which are his ancestral names and all of which display an interesting image he has of himself. He is now Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa-Za-Banga. Sese means 'the earth' in his native Ngbandi. Seko, the name of his grandfather, stands for 'the warrior who dares and cannot know defeat because of his endurance and his inflexible will to win'. Kuku-Ngbendu means 'hot pepper'. Wa-Za-Banga stands for 'the all-powerful warrior who leaves fire in his wake and goes from conquest to conquest'.

People who have met him speak of his charm, his generosity and his sensitivity. And as he retreats more and more into the lonely

isolation of the Presidency, speculation about Mobutu's mysterious personality, which alone dominates Congo politics and has growing influence in all central Africa, becomes intense.

His ambitions for himself and the Congo encompass all Africa. "He wants the Congo to be top of the heap by 1980," said a diplomat in Kinshasa, "and he wants to be the leading figure on the continent." He surrounds himself with grandeur and prestige on an extravagant scale, cultivating greatness for himself with the use of relentless propaganda, and the spending of large sums of money.

Mobutu at the tender age of 41 is in fact in a good position to realise his ambitions, if he can keep his growing number of enemies at bay.

Together with Nigeria and South Africa, the Congo is one of the three strategically important land masses on the African continent outside the northern Arab states, in terms of its position, its mineral wealth from the copper mines of Katanga and its ability to marshal economic and political strength. Superimposed on the map of Europe the Congo would cover Belgium, Luxembourg, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, France, Spain, parts of West Germany and Switzerland. Well supported by the Americans, within whose sphere of influence it falls, Mobutu is going to make sure the world is aware of it. It was reported that he cancelled his visit to England last year because Emperor Hirohito of Japan, who was staying at Buckingham Palace, was upgrading him on protocol. Mobutu was booked in at Claridge's, and there were no plans for the Queen to meet him at the airport.

The skill with which he has masterminded the internal politics of the Congo was something nobody expected from an army man. Lumumba, Kasavubu and Tshombe, the big names of Congolese politics after independence, all failed to unite the country by political means, and Mobutu had a hand in removing them all.

He produced his first coup in 1960 - soon after independence, when he handed back power to the politicians within a few weeks - and his second in 1965.

In the years between, during those successive regimes, Mobutu is in fact considered by some well informed observers to have been the leader of the Congo in all but name. Outwardly he was a leading member



High fashion in the Congo. These friends from Kinshasa have followed their favourite band to Thysville for a weekend of festivities of the powerful Biza group of pro-Western politicians who permanently ran the key organs of the State in those years, and who became Mobutu's ministers after 1965. The Americans, having won their pitch after sponsoring the 1960 coup, were going to leave nothing to chance. "They were watching him during that time to see if he really was their man," said one such observer, "and waiting for the right moment to step in."

The story of the rise of Mobutu echoes all the extremes of politics in new Africa. It has the ingredients of a Shakespearean tragedy with its intrigues (of the Americans and Belgians in particular), assassination, blood, guilt and civil war.

He became a soldier by chance when he was thrown out of school in his native Equator province for throwing ink at the Belgian schoolmaster. Punishment under the Belgian colonial law was conscription into the Force Publique. He spent six years as a clerk, mostly at Luluabourg on the copper-carrying railway line

patronising, and had provoked Lumumba to fury. When the army mutinied at Thysville, the Belgians evacuated en masse and the administration collapsed. Lumumba made Mobutu chief of staff of the new Armée Nationale Congolaise.

Lumumba was losing control of the Government. Moïse Tshombe, "the blue-eyed boy of the Western world", had declared Katanga independent with Belgian backing, and when the U.N., who Lumumba had called in to keep the peace, refused to help him end the secession, he got transport equipment from the Russians to ferry his own troops to Katanga. Lumumba became a sacrifice to Cold War politics. He was already being pushed aside by the combined forces of the Americans, Belgians and United Nations as a dangerous radical and a threat to Western interests in the Congo, and this last act seemed to convince them they were right. The poignancy and drama of those events is well preserved in Conor Cruise O'Brien's play *Murderous Angels*. In Andrew Tully's book on the CIA, the Agency claims the success of the coup that followed. It was General Kettani, Moroccan deputy commander of the U.N. forces, who helped Mobutu organise the army for a coup. President Kasavubu and Prime Minister Lumumba tried to dismiss each other, both soliciting Mobutu's help.

"Mobutu's heart was swinging between the two, wrote Thomas Kanza, the former Congolese envoy to the U.N. (*Conflict in the Congo*, Penguin 65p), "but his heart could not go on swinging indefinitely, for the Americans had no time to lose in their fight against Soviet influence in the Congo." Mobutu stepped in and announced his coup. "This is not a revolution," he said, "it is a truce."

The strange paradox of Mobutu's personality showed itself here for the first time. He was said to have been deeply distressed by taking power unconstitutionally. He had even wanted to resign before the coup and he immediately handed the Government over to a commission of university graduates. That was the retiring, unconfident Mobutu, travelling back to Equator province to reorganise the army, apparently wanting no part in politics or power. But in December 1960, three months after the coup, he sent Lumumba to his death in Katanga, and that first act of ruthless expediency has haunted him politically and personally ever since. ➤

that runs from Katanga to Port Francqui. But he was intelligent, even bookish. He began writing articles and on completing his draft he ended up editor of the magazine *Actualité* in Leopoldville, now Kinshasa. He met Lumumba, the leader of the *évolués*, who had already formed the Mouvement National Congolais, which was to be the ruling party at independence. Lumumba was a stranger in Leopoldville and Mobutu put him up, wrote articles on him and introduced him into the political scene. Lumumba sent him to Belgium as the party's representative, and Mobutu became his confidant.

It has been said that Mobutu was working for the Belgian *Sûreté* at that time. Lumumba was warned later, but characteristically - and it was one of his worst characteristics as a politician - believed in Mobutu's loyalty until the last moment.

Within a few weeks of independence, things went drastically wrong. Lumumba was hated by the Belgians for his speech on Independence Day. King Baudouin's speech had been

Lumumba escaped from the protective custody of the U.N. troops and headed for Stanleyville. Mobutu's troops gave chase. They arrived at the Sankuru river near Mwaka, the border of Orientale province where Lumumba would have been safe, to find that Lumumba and Pierre Mulele had already crossed. But Lumumba's wife was left on the opposite bank and Lumumba decided to go back to protect her from the soldiers despite the pleadings of Mulele, who tried to stop the boatman taking him. That was the end of Lumumba. He was seized, beaten up and bundled into a helicopter for Leopoldville. Mobutu sent him to his arch enemy Moïse Tshombe in Katanga where he was assassinated.

Kinshasa radio now croons out its own abbreviated version of history in a song, called *Lumumba National Hero*.

Translation: *Aah the death of Lumumba made Africa cry.*

Because of Lumumba the Congo made the world tremble.

He left us Mobutu to direct our big country.

Our elder brother Mobutu has taken us out of suffering.

Ah, mon frère, la mort, le malheur, le coeur fait mal.

Lumumba as the nationalist and man of freedom became a martyr for pan-Africanism and the people's adulation for him reached alarming proportions after his death.

"Lumumba," said one Congolese politician, "died 11 years ago. His memory is like a political time bomb. He is more important dead than he ever was alive. In the Congo now in order to gain popularity you must as a priority present yourself as a follower of Lumumba." And there is Nkrumah's warning from exile: "Of one thing I am sure. The victors in the final battle for the Congo's emancipation will spring from the blood of Lumumba."

The rebellion of 1964, suppressed with the help of the mercenaries after terrible brutality and bloodshed, was the end of the Lumumbists' official claim to a share in the Government. Now Mobutu has declared him a national hero out of political necessity and has declared himself to be Lumumba's direct political heir. Some say the guilt for Lumumba's death affects Mobutu deeply. He is said to hate having any of his former colleagues around him who know the details of Lumumba's death - he



Sport, especially cycling and football, is an obsession in the Congo

has dismissed them all from the administration. It is perhaps the increasing pain of it all which has led to his isolation. "Mobutu is in complete control," said a former Congolese Cabinet Minister, "but because of Lumumba he feels insecure. It is impossible to explain to a Westerner, but you can see it in everything he does. If you mentioned Lumumba in an interview, he would either go into a tirade and throw you out, or be unnaturally eager to speak about it."

He seems to switch obsessively between extremes of forgiveness and revenge, usually in that order, for Lumumba's ex-colleagues and supporters. As a demonstration of his new-found stability Mobutu offered an amnesty, in 1970, to all those who had taken part in the rebellion. Several thousand came back but greatest for Mobutu's prestige was the return of Christopher Gbenye, former leader of the Popular Republic of the Congo in Stanleyville, and Nicholas Olenga who was one of the leaders of the rebellion. Since then both Olenga, Gbenye and Jean Willy Tshimbila, a former Congolese politician who had come back from exile in Cairo, have been tried for subversion. Olenga was sentenced to 10 years; the rest are under close police observation.

The big names, particularly, Antoine Gizenga, who was Lumumba's 'heir', Gaston Soumaliot and Thomas Kanza are still abroad. They will probably never return while Mobutu is in power. They saw what happened to Pierre Mulele, who led the rebels against the Government in 1964, and who was living in Brazzaville (capital of Communist Congo-Brazzaville, the former French colony across the River Congo). Lured back into the Congo with an amnesty from Mobutu

and promises of protection, he was treacherously murdered, in the most horrifying manner, soon after his return. According to reliable accounts, the Presidential yacht was sent over the river to fetch him while Mobutu was out of the country. On board were Justin Bomboko, the Foreign Minister, General Bumba, head of the paracommandos, and Jean Manzikala, ex-Minister of State and a man greatly feared in Kinshasa for his personal policing activities on Mobutu's behalf - three of Mulele's most committed enemies. On arrival there was a champagne reception at the house of Mobutu's uncle, General Bobozo. Among the guests were soldiers who had received scars and mutilations at the hands of the rebels. It was a bad sign. Mulele's friends warned him there was a plot to kill him. But Bumba managed to call him aside and Mulele was taken away and methodically cut into pieces, while still alive, beginning, it is said, with his fingers. The remnants were then fed to the crocodiles.

A myth about Mulele's magic powers had persisted from the days of the rebellion when his soldiers were told that because of his spells, bullets would not penetrate their bodies. When Mobutu returned he ordered the yacht to be burned, then compromised by having every room that Mulele had entered dismantled and rebuilt.

Mulele's murder may or may not have been carried out on Mobutu's instructions, but it was characteristic of Mobutu's sense of justice and punishment. In 1966 he discovered the 'Whitsun Plot', a plan to overthrow him by ex-Prime Minister Evariste Kimba and three other ex-Ministers. Mobutu's announcement sounded like something from *Alice in Wonderland*. "The suspects will

appear before a military court and this court will condemn them and they will be hanged." All four were duly strung up in a public square to the accompaniment of martial music.

It was the beginning of his total control over the political scene. "Now you see what happens when you oppose your chief," said Mobutu. To a Belgian television reporter Mobutu said that his announcement may have sounded illogical, "but you Europeans reason in Cartesian terms. One had to set a vigorous example. We have our habits and morality and you have yours."

Democracy, according to Mobutu is, in fact, not the African way of politics - nevertheless he was returned with over 100 per cent. of the vote in 1970 - and he has been trying to extricate the Congolese mentality from the taste of it which they bitterly acquired between 1960 and 1965, "In my experience," Mobutu has said: "I have realised one thing: the necessity for an authority, an authority which makes people respect order. Not a brutal authority, but one which if it is to be respected must make every citizen in a country like ours the object of care and responsible attention. The people have a passion for their leader, and the leader has a passion for his people." Mobutu has laid down that, "democracy for the Congolese head of state is the art of making the Congolese people happy."

Mobutu now governs through the only official political party, the MPR (Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution), whose political bureau act as a council of state. Membership for the Congolese is compulsory, and its structure reaches to the smallest villages in the Congo. As a unifying factor for nationalism and a huge political intelligence system, the MPR is one of Mobutu's considerable successes. He has also regrouped the 21 provinces created at independence, which had become corrupt little kingdoms removed from the influence of the central Government, into eight larger provinces. The governors in each case are frequently rotated to prevent the building up of a power base in a country whose three main towns are as far apart as London and Madrid.

The rediscovery of the Congolese political soul - or Mobutu's version of "Zairian authenticity" - meant a breaking with Western traditions, although not with the West itself. The head of state is like the tradi- ➤



The last photograph of Lumumba (right) and friends after their arrest by Mobutu's soldiers, on their way to death in Katanga

tional chief, the supreme and only authority. He has to surround himself with the majesty of power which creates, in turn, a sense of nationalism. Mobutu has put his portrait on the new currency. He is depicted rolling up his sleeves for the economic revolution. His face adorns the wax-printed materials worn by the women. He has published the *Little Green Book* of his sayings, and a double LP called *Peuple Congolais, le Président Mobutu te Parle*. It contains a memorable tirade against Union Minière, the Belgian mining complex, all delivered in an angry monotone.

Mobutu is touchy and vain, not uncommon traits among politicians in general and widely found among the Congolese. He hates criticism, especially in the foreign Press. Foreign journalists who were eye witnesses to the shooting and killing of more than 60 demonstrating students by the army in 1969 and who reported that figure were expelled. Mobutu had given the official death toll as six, and retreated into the Presidency, apparently laid low with remorse.

"He can be charming in informal groups," said one diplomat, "but he is always very sharp. When you're in his presence there's no doubt about who is boss." He works himself and his aides round the clock. He reads voraciously, consumes news, watches the teleprinters. And he is minutely observant. He is known to have congratulated a member of the Bureau Politique, as he walked off the aeroplane from a foreign trip, on a speech made in a remote area two days beforehand. He once spotted an uninvited Press man at a packed Press conference, and tore up his notebook before throwing him out.

Mobutu's progress towards the image of a lonely despot began in 1969 when he began firing his Congolese advisers in the Presidency, all young and gifted graduates who had trained in London, Brussels and Prague. They were senior in importance to the Ministers in the cabinet and they saw Mobutu from morning until night. Last year there were, significantly, two Americans working in the Presidency, economist Roland Levin and U.S. AID executive Bob Keating, who is concerned officially with transport problems.

"As the situation improved," said one Congolese observer, "Mobutu's head turned and he didn't want to be embarrassed by young people around him. He also had a measure of jealousy about them. He has a complex about university graduates, perhaps because he didn't go to university himself. He is slightly in awe of them, but hates being contradicted by them. People started telling him he was the greatest leader in Africa and he started reigning instead of governing."

The last obstacles to his supreme power were the members of the Binza group. Among them were Justin Bomboko, Foreign Minister under almost every Government since Lumumba; Victor Nendaka, head of the Surêté; Joseph Nsinga, Minister of State; and Albert Ndele, Governor of the National Bank.

Nsinga had begun to hanker after power. While Mobutu was away he had borrowed the presidential motor-cycle escort. Mobutu invited him for a trip on his yacht having arranged for a front page exposé to appear the same day accusing him of signing state cheques over to him for 100,000 dollars. Nsinga was stuck



Mobutu the strong-arm man, in tinted glasses, after his first coup in 1960. Guilt for Lumumba's death still haunts him politically

on the boat for the whole trip, his political career in ruins. He is back in business now - running a river transport company. Albert Ndele was fired in 1970 for his implication in a major scandal involving currency trading on the black market by Belgian bankers in the Congo. The bankers were accused of having negotiated Ndele's cheques on the black market. He, too, has found favour again, running Mobutu's personal bank accounts. It was thought a mistake to have humiliated Ndele. He was the financier for the Binzer group, and knows the secrets of the making of Mobutu's fortune.

When Bomboko and Nendaka were first fired, and then arrested in October last year for subversive activities, it seemed that Mobutu was either frightened about the worsening situation in the Congo and his growing unpopularity, or had simply lost the balance of his political judgment. They were the two biggest wheels of Congolese politics, described as "les inamovibles" in the Press. Mobutu knew their power and had played one off against the other for years.

At the time of writing there is reliable information that both Bomboko and Nendaka have been severely beaten up, and there is a rumour in Kinshasa that they have been killed in detention. The International Commission of Jurists sent a cable to Mobutu, expressing fear for their lives. If they are dead, and they certainly have not come to trial as promised, Mobutu will have much to answer for to their followers.

In the last year Mobutu has talked almost paranoically about subversion, and of threatened attacks against his person. He announced

that Bomboko and Nendaka wanted to take him to a house far from Kinshasa and blow him up with dynamite, "of which ten boxes have been found". If this failed they were to organise a gang to kill the President. With great ceremony Mobutu one day took the whole diplomatic corps out to a wood and showed them candles burning in the trees. They were a part of the ceremony of witchcraft that Bomboko and Nendaka were using, he told them, to cast spells against him. (The obsession about witchcraft harks back significantly to the last days of Nkrumah in Ghana, when he was finally losing control of the political situation.)

In June last year, to the great surprise of the Americans in Kinshasa, who are used to being consulted about major decisions, Mobutu enrolled all the 2000 students of Louvianum University into the army for two years after they had staged demonstrations. The students were given three days to enrol or be tried as deserters. Sixteen who refused were jailed for 10 years. The students were given basic training and sent off into distant parts of the country without arms. Mobutu said it was all part of a foreign plot to kill him. Always pathologically anti-Communist, Mobutu expelled 20 Eastern diplomats from the Russian, Yugoslav and Czech embassies. He banned several organisations which he said were contrary to public order, including the Freemasons.

Most extraordinary of all the accusations was that against a former army colonel, Honore Kudiakubanza. Mobutu wheeled him out during a rally at the Tata Raphael stadium in Kinshasa, to read aloud a letter he had sent to Brazzaville. The

letter turned out to be a highly articulate condemnation of Mobutu's regime, and it seemed that by allowing it to be read, Mobutu had reached the stage where he believed that any criticism against him could be nothing more than subversive lies. But for the outside world it was remarkably revealing.

Kudiakubanza, who was a military magistrate, said, among other things, that he had made strong protests about the executions without trial that he was asked to turn a blind eye to. "Once an engineer in Kisangani - Njalo - was arrested and I was invited to try him, but before I got to Kisangani the poor man had been executed. I again strongly protested against this execution. But I was again accused of treachery. After a series of meetings with General Mobutu and some senior officers, I told them that I supported the idea of liquidating people without trial. I told them this because I was helpless." Elsewhere in the letter he says: "I wonder why everybody in Zaire relaxes in complacency while General Mobutu spearheads very strong propaganda for himself to be elected or proclaimed President for life. Some people say even General Mobutu intends to proclaim himself Emperor. Where are we heading? Is there nobody in this country capable of breaking this myth? I am convinced that Hitler's dictatorship was better than the one we have now in Zaire. General Mobutu's dictatorship is unbearable. People are afraid to say anything against him for fear of being arrested. Zaire has completely sold out." He goes on: "Americans continue to stay in our country and have bought factories. Most of our people are money-crazy. They intend to live sumptuously while the masses live in misery. The dictatorship in our country can rightly be called bloody. Truly it is a fascist dictatorship.

"The Zaire authorities claim to do a lot of things in Lumumba's name, but on the contrary they arrest all those who worked with the late Lumumba. The authorities pretend that Lumumba's former associates that have been arrested are in their respective villages. This is not true. They are all here in Kinshasa under house arrest."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★
It is the army alone upon which Mobutu depends for his safety. Fourteen per cent. of the budget is spent on the 60,000 men in uniform - the third largest army in black



Victor Nendaka, awesome security chief, who is now being held in jail

Africa, after Nigeria and Ethiopia. Most of the money and equipment goes to Mobutu's own highly mobile and well-paid paracommandos. They are his special bodyguard, hand-picked for their loyalty, many of them from Equator province. An officer gets a basic £300 a month, as well as a car, a house and regular bonuses, compared to a schoolteacher or a junior civil servant who earns perhaps £15 a month. By Congo standards they are a crack force, trained by the Israelis and capable of paralysing the rest of the Congolese army, who outnumber them eight to one.

The Presidency lies inside the paracommando camp on the outskirts of Kinshasa. But it is the army that could undo Mobutu, not the politicians. Its young, foreign-trained officers want quick promotion and power on an equal scale with the politicians. They exert considerable influence on Mobutu; the Whitsun Plot was said to be their discovery and they persuaded Mobutu to sack General Mulamba, his Prime Minister, in 1965. General Bumba, head of the paracommandos, who comes from Equator and was always said to be extremely loyal to Mobutu, had also been jailed by the President at the time of writing.

If Mobutu was frightened of one man in the army, it was Jacques Pouati. He was military attache in Brussels, New York and London before Mobutu brought him back to be Chief of Staff. Mobutu must have seen that Pouati was in the best position, just as Mobutu had once been, to stage a coup. Pouati tried to install his own servants in the house Mobutu had given him, but was refused, and told he would have to keep those already there. When Pouati dis-



Bomboko (left), perennial Foreign Minister, with Moïse Tshombe

covered they were spying on him, he had them arrested by his aides. They beat the servants to death for their misdemeanour, and Mobutu threw Pouati in jail for an indefinite period. "Civilians are no danger to Mobutu," said a Congolese politician, "if you are looking for a challenge to his authority, look inside the army."

Mobutu's closest adviser and executive is a Belgian, Colonel Jean Powys. He is extremely loyal to Mobutu, and a clever psychologist who is said to be able to spend three or four hours at a time with Mobutu - a rarity these days - and is actually able to make him laugh. He holds the Presidential purse-strings and sees Mobutu's projects through. He is also fervently anti-American, like almost every Belgian in the Congo. Either with luck or uncanny foresight, Powys befriended Mobutu years before independence. He was a high-ranking officer in the Force Publique and back in 1957 took Mobutu to dine in the Belgian officers' mess at Luluabourg, when he was a penny-a-line journalist. It caused a small sensation at the time, and Mobutu never forgot the compliment. Powys, who was ADC to Kasavubu after Independence, and then to Mobutu, was loathed by most Belgians for "opening the door to the Congolese".

★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Mobutu's popularity may be falling with the decline in the Zairian economy. His "economic revolution" - Mobutu's favourite phrase - looked like becoming a reality during the boom years of 1969 and 1970 when the copper price was high. He toured the world tirelessly selling the idea of the Congo's stability and wealth and persuaded the French Government to



Pierre Mulele, ex-rebel chief, brutally murdered after amnesty

quote the Zaire on the Paris Bourse before the South African Rand. Mobutu created the Zaire - the country's independent currency - to be the dollar of Africa. Last year he went to Central African Republic, Chad, Sudan, Kenya, Senegal, Liberia, Togo, Japan, France and Formosa, and he would have gone to Britain, to search for investment, or to display himself.

But things are now beginning to slip. The world price of copper, which represents half the Congo's exports, began to fall, mainly, it is thought, because of the running down of the Vietnam War. Investment rose by 45 per cent. in 1969 and 32 per cent. in 1970, but last year it had fallen to a mere 6 per cent. The growth rate was halved. There was a balance of payments deficit of some £34 million last year. Revenues stagnated and salaries rose, the wage bill of government employees by 32 per cent. And it seemed that the miracle was over. "The situation is not as rosy as it used to be," said a diplomat in Kinshasa, "the fall in copper prices has resulted in an economic squeeze which tends to make the people wonder what the Government should be doing about it."

It is tempting for an outsider to take the Machiavellian attitude that only a strong and unchallengeable leader like Mobutu can give the Congo the time it needs for development. But so far the performance has been fairly negative. Despite the Congo's vast wealth, the per capita income is lower than most poorer African countries, including Congo-Brazzaville, the People's Republic which is poorly endowed with mineral wealth compared to Congo-Kinshasa.

The average Congolese is still worse off than he was before Independence. The per capita income has actually decreased since July 1967 – the time of Mobutu's monetary reforms and the creation of the Zaire. There is a conspicuous and ever-widening division between the rich politicians, civil servants, businessmen, army officers – the elite who have taken over the administration – and the rest of the people. Mobutu himself is a man of great wealth. He owns houses, properties, hotels, apartment blocks, newspapers, construction and building companies all the way from Kinshasa to Abidjan, to Nice, Brussels and Lausanne. Eighteen per cent. of the Congolese budget is made over to Presidential expenses. Some of it goes on State projects which he personally supervises. But an enormous proportion is spent on his own prestige and political welfare.

Mobutu having built such a highly autocratic structure of government around himself, in which he takes every decision from the publication of a book to the granting of an import licence, his ministers have less and less responsibility. Kinshasa resembles a permanent convention centre where endless ministerial speeches are made and endless receptions are held, all given blanket coverage by the movie cameras of the Ministry of Information, and on the whole signifying nothing more than repetitive propaganda and the parading of the sharply-dressed elite. The frantic Congolese love of pleasure, the thousands of girls of rare elegance and beauty who strut around Kinshasa in their high bandannas, and the music which never stops, still make Kinshasa about the most enjoyable city in black Africa for the tourist. It resembles a kind of black Las Vegas, with skyscrapers and flashy American sports cars. There is a prevailing atmosphere of the mutual lining of pockets, of riches and corruption.

The jingle for Katanga beer, played in *soucouis* on the radio, has become political allegory. "When you drink champagne," it says, "don't forget about Simba." [The famous bottled beer that sustained thirsty soldiers during the rebellions.] One Congolese politician thinks that Mobutu is in great danger from this lack of contact with the country. "Nasser would go down to the officers' mess and talk and be chums with the officers and one might give him a hint of something that needed

attention. No-one would dare do that now with Mobutu. He has made the classic error of alienating his friends, depending on untried people and therefore getting out of touch. The people of the Congo remember Kasavubu, Lumumba and Tshombe and they know a politician can't last for ever. They watch for signs of his unpopularity. They begin to lose faith in their leader."

When Mobutu went to Switzerland in January for a medical check-up, there seemed to be an atmosphere of impending crisis. As often before there was talk of a coup, but this time there were some new elements. In addition to the serious economic situation, Mobutu would be forced to devalue the Zaire, to follow the dollar. It was perhaps to divert interest from the worsening situation, and the anti-Mobutu murmurings that Mobutu embarked on the massive programme of "Zaire authenticity". There was the changing of names – something to occupy almost every individual with a non-African Christian name among his 21 million subjects – the renaming of streets, including the Avenue Charles de Gaulle, "despite the admiration we have for this illustrious Frenchman", and the taking down of monuments. There was discontent in the universities which had almost stopped functioning after their amalgamation by Mobutu. The students had had time to infiltrate into the army. Would the army follow them if they staged another demonstration like that of 1969? It all depended on the Americans – without whose support any coup would fail – and the Israelis, who train Mobutu's paracommandos. An American-connected engineering firm, Berger, was reported to be hiring 10 top civil servants, all of different nationalities, at large salaries, to come to the Congo in the near future. Continuity of the Civil Service is the most important consideration at the time of a coup. Had the Americans lost faith, too?

Mobutu himself appeared to have no such qualms. When the youth movement of the MPR had dismantled all the monuments in Kinshasa, breaking up the one of Stanley shading his eyes and peering upstream, Kinshasa Radio announced that a new statue would be built to Mobutu in celebration of his revolutionary leadership. There would be four towers stretching 210 metres into the sky, which would make it "the highest building in the world" ●