Congo gains independence from the Belgian Empire, 1959-60

Time period notes: African Colonial Independence Campaign

May 1959 to May 1960

Country: Democratic Republic of the Congo

Location Description: Dispersed throughout the Congo

Goals:
The goal of this campaign was to gain Congo's independence from the Belgium administration.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 032. Taunting officials  ›  Congolese refused to stand to attention and some actively mocked Belgium officials.
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 133. Reluctant and slow compliance  ›  Congolese were purposely slow and incoherent when communicating with Belgium officials

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 087. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments  ›  Congolese refused to pay their dues and taxes.
- 090. Revenue refusal
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions  ›  The Parti Solidaire Africain declared their intent to boycott the December elections.
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books  ›  The Parti Solidaire Africain used measures to spread the word about the protest to more rural areas.

Methods in 4th segment:


Methods in 5th segment:
• 004. Signed public statements › The Political Parties demanded a round table discussion with Belgium as to a date for full Independence.

Methods in 6th segment:

• 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government › By this time, the political parties had taken on many quasi-governmental roles, including a court system

Notes on Methods:
Most of the methods, before the 4th segment, were not explicitly initiated by the political parties, rather the Congolese people were doing them of their own volition, in an unorganized manner. However, these acts set the stage for the political parties to come in and organize the larger and hugely successful December election boycott.

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

• educated elites
• farmers
• rural poor workers
• urban workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Antoine Gizaenga, President of National Central Committee of Parti Solidaire Africain, this committee ran the actual administration of the party.

Sylvain Kama, Director of National Political Bureau, the part of the party where deliberations were made and votes before party action.

Cleophas Kamitatu, President of Kikwit PSA Committee, the arm of the PSA that was based in the Congo interior and rural areas, rather than the city, Leopoldville.

Partners:
ABAKO, another political party with similar goals.

LUKA and ABAZI, two political parties that were not as large and dominant as the PSA and ABAKO.

External allies:
The Catholic Church and Congolese Clergy, though officially neutral, some clergy worked to help the campaign.

Involvement of social elites:
Many of the leaders in the political parties were Congolese social elites, reflecting a divide in educational level and political power between the leaders and the majority of the members.
Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
- Parti Solidaire Africain

Groups in 2nd Segment:
- ABAKO

Groups in 3rd Segment:
- Catholic Clergy

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:
- ABAZI
- LUKA

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:
As noted in the case narrative, there was a falling apart in the alliance between the different groups after Independence was achieved.

Though the Catholic Clergy are placed in the 4th segment, their effect is hard to pinpoint as they were involved with informal support of the campaign and never on an official level. Individual members acted on their own volition.

Though the other political parties (LUKA and ABAZI) were not expressly involved with organizing the election boycott they were at the round table talks in February and a big part of the final Independence elections.

Segment Length: 2 Months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
The Belgian government and administrators

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
There were some heat of the moment acts of violence early on in the greater movement for independence. The Belgian government used arrests and the threat of arrest and fines, as tools of oppression, trying to use terror and limitations on individual freedom to prevent the Congolese from participating in the boycott of the elections. Resisters were forcibly arrested and physically detained in prisons.

Repressive Violence:
As noted above, the Belgian government officials arrested and fined the Congolese protesters. This included forcibly removing individuals from their homes and placing them in prisons. Other instances of violence were during the protest are not known.

Success Outcome
Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
After the campaign, Belgium realized and recognized that Congo was ungovernable and initiated the roundtable talks that led to independence in 1960 and a free election. The Parti Solidaire Africain grew in power, as did several other political parties. However, the political situation quickly disintegrated after Independence was declared, as the Force Publique mutinied and threw the country into chaos. Thus, though they achieved the goal of independence, it was not a stable independence.

In the 1950s, revolution was brewing in the Belgian Congo. Africans living in colonized countries felt the winds of change swirling as their mother countries in Europe struggled to stand back up after suffering often devastating defeats in World War II, championing the ideal self determination and freedom while continuing to oppress their colonies.

In the Congo in particular, there was a rather sudden rise of political parties, led by evolues, educated Congolese elites. They gave the Congolese a voice in creating institutional representation of what they wanted Congo to eventually become. One such party was the Parti Solidaire Africain, which pushed for immediate and complete independence from Belgium.

Political parties gained power, but only after the people themselves had been protesting the Belgian rule in their own way. In the 1950s, the increased bureaucratization in the Belgian administration of the Congo actually decreased the level of control that the local administrators had over this territory, as they were cluttered with paper work and the pressure from their higher-ups to reduce the number of problematic incidents. Often, they simply began looking away when such incidents did occur, failing to report them, with the result of emboldening the Congolese masses.

Change began to accelerate after the riots in Leopoldville, Congo’s capital, on January 4, 1959. Thirty-four Africans were killed in riots that broke out after members of the political party ABAKO, or Alliance des Bakongo, were not allowed to assemble by the Belgium administration.

This spread and agitated already high discontent to new levels, as the rural populations began protesting Belgian rule like never before. Over the next few months, the Congolese felt empowered to resist. They ‘tested’ the Belgian administrators, daring them to punish the colonized people. And often, because of the bureaucratic restraints, little was done, only empowering the people more. Families did not show up for the census. Congolese would refuse to stand at attention before administrators, or would purposely respond slowly to them, or even speak back and engage in altercations or fights with Europeans. There was a tremendous psychological shift happening, one that prepared the Congolese for political parties to channel and organize that rage and newfound courage.

The Parti Solidaire Africain only really started in May 1959, but was very successful in the rural communities, as they provided a legitimate and fully Congolese institution to organize and channel a source of national pride and unity, as well as opposition to the Belgium administration. They allied themselves with ABAKO, which was the other large political party at the time, though there were numerous other smaller groups as well. The Parti Solidaire Africain leadership sent propaganda teams to convince rural villagers to join, finding great enthusiasm for action against Belgium already there. As members of the party began to protest more and more, they also began to provide functions and services provided by the Belgian administration, such as healthcare, judicial systems, taxes, etc. The Parti Solidaire Africain became more and more like a quasi-government, stepping in to provide for the people, and uniting them in their membership and in a sense of belonging.

There was a heavy emphasis placed by the Parti Solidaire Africain on ‘staying calm and not engaging in violence.’ The Parti Solidaire Africain leadership circulated many pamphlets and articles among the party elite arguing against any form of violence and vocally rebuked incidences of violence that did occasionally occur. In response to one such incident, Katshunga, a party
leader, wrote, “I regret this act of violence, and you do so also, it should not recur because it is against our doctrine. Tell this, and re-tell it, to the children and to all those who are excited especially at such moments.”

In 1959, the Belgian government decided to hold an election that would give Congolese puppets formal power over the governance of the Congo. The Belgian intention was to take the relevance from the radicals’ lips by appeasing the people with a moderate puppet government, and erase the calls for independence. Only men were allowed to vote.

The Parti Solidaire Africain urged its members and the Congolese people to boycott the elections, by not registering and not participating in the election. This movement and protest was extremely successful for a variety of reasons.

The Parti Solidaire Africain was in contact with the Belgium government and did have some negotiations, as they worked out the terms and process of the protest. On September 27, 1959, Parti Solidaire Africain and ABAKO sent a joint memo to the Belgian government explaining that they would boycott the elections in December, “as long as the electoral procedures remain undemocratic”.

The Belgian government continued with the elections, not only underestimating the clout the political parties, but also the passion of the people. Many people were tempted by the idea of an election that promised genuine self-governance, so the Parti Solidaire Africain had to work extremely hard explaining the deception. While Belgium tried at first to arrest Congolese men who tried to avoid registering for the election, they soon found that it was difficult to catch everyone, since so many Congolese men were complicit in the protest. The Belgium administration issued the threat of seven days in prison and a fine of 500 francs.

Although many men were arrested, especially in the more rural areas, the boycott persisted and was enormously successful. Approximately 5.27 % of the 397,086 people in Bas-Congo district voted, and 1.2% of the 1,157,112 in the Kwilu district. In some areas there were much higher rates of participation, ranging from 30 to 60%, but these numbers were primarily limited to areas with large European populations or where ABAKO and Parti Solidaire Africain did not have as much influence.

The overwhelming success of the boycott proved to the Belgian administration that Congo was ungovernable for them. Deciding against a bloody and possibly drawn out and politically costly affair to make the Congolese comply, like the war in Algeria, the administration chose to cut the increasingly unprofitable colony. Moreover, international pressure was against them, as the United States was pressuring European nations to give up their colonies, aligned with the idea of self-determination.

On January 20, 1960, the Belgian government invited members of 13 different political parties – 96 different Congolese – to the month-long Brussels Round Table talks. At the talks the Congolese demanded immediate independence while the Belgian government preferred a process spanning three to four years. Putting up a united front and completely unwilling to back down, the Congolese representatives got their demand, and the date for Congo’s independence was set: June 30, 1960. Free elections for the government were set for May.

However, a rift between the leadership and the masses was exposed once the unifying desire for independence was achieved. The Parti Solidaire Africain broke along the true disparity of power and influence that existed all along between the elites and the masses and between different ethnic groups. After the May 1960 elections, the Parti Solidaire Africain began to fall apart along issues of ideology, power differences, and ethnicity.

However, everything was wiped clean when the military, the Force Publique, rebelled and mutinied against the new government and threw the Congo into complete crisis on every level.

**Research Notes**

**Influences:**

The development of political parties and the boycotts were stirred up and influenced by other African colonies, such as
Algeria, rising up and fighting for their independence. (1)

Sources:


Additional Notes:
Most of the particular details of the boycott come from the book, "Political Protest in the Congo", and the author himself notes the scarcity of documents on the subject and how sparse detailed information on the event is. He often qualifies himself, noting that much of his information is not supported by cross references to other documents.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
David Zhou, 12/03/2012

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