

# Nationalist movement of the belgian congo



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Belgian Congo represents today's Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The country got her first name, Belgian Congo, from her colonizer, Belgium, which was headed by King Leopold II. This event took place in November 15, 1908. Belgium Congo remained under the Belgians rule till June 30, 1960 when she gained her independence (Absolute Astronomy, par. 1). This paper is aimed at digging deeply into the events that took place in the Belgian Congo under Leopold II's rule which eventually led to the formation of the Nationalist Movement of the Belgian Congo.

## **Overview**

Belgium's control over Congo dates back to 1885 when King Leopold II used the help of Henry Morton Stanley who was an explorer to fulfill this interest. No other European monarch had expressed interest in Congo and this made Leopold II the first one. Among the things that attracted him to Congo included slave trade, rubber and minerals for which he made a gold mine. Congo remained under his control until 1908 when the Belgian government took over. Belgium remained powerful over Congo for 52 years until she got her independence in 1960. Patrice Lumumba made a great impact in Congo's history as he headed Congo's first nationalist party. When Congo gained her independence, Lumumba was appointed Prime Minister. In the same breath, two provinces which were rich in resources pulled out due to regional conflicts. Military struggles were rampant in Congo at the time and Joseph Mobutu who was an army chief betrayed Lumumba. Lumumba was seen as a threat and this led to his kidnap and eventual murder in 1961. Those involved in his murder included foreign emissaries (Greenholt, par. 1).

## **King Leopold II's rule**

Leopold II ruled with an iron hand and he fought hard to control this very profitable nation. He was the sole executive chairman and shareholder of the Belgian Congo. He was making huge money from sales of copper, rubber among other minerals not forgetting that he had capitalized on the lucrative slave trade which was prominent in many parts of the world. Under Leopold II's rule, the natives were subjected to brutal mistreatment. The natural resources were also plundered and thus benefited very few people.

International scandals were also on the rise. In 1903, 122 Congolese natives were brutally murdered during a rubber collecting mission (Ankomah, par. 1).

This event brought about unrest and Roger Casement of the British Consul filed a report that victimized white officials under Leopold II. This report was taken seriously and the perpetrators of this heinous crime were thoroughly punished upon arrest. The report filed by Roger Casement went ahead to pinpoint the leading causes of depopulation in Leopold II's era. These he listed as indiscriminate war, tropical diseases, starvation and a reduced number of births. Some of these conditions were dehumanizing and this led to their exposure to the world. This was done by the United State's and European's press. Leopold's rule came under much pressure from diplomats and the general public. This led to an end of his rule and Congo was now considered as a Belgium's colony (Ankomah).

## **Life in Congo after Leopold II's rule**

After king Leopold's rule hit a snag, the Belgium government took over power. This led to reformation of Leopold's shortcomings and the situation

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improved. This new government came with its recommendations which were geared at giving the Congolese natives a better life. On 18th October, 1908, a Colonial Charter was put in place and its Article 3 clearly stated that forced labor would no longer be exercised. This harmony brought about increased production in cotton and palm oil which increased the revenue. An education system was installed and the natives were even taught native languages like Swahili. Political administration was under the Belgian government where the King of Belgians remained the president. The Congolese natives were however not happy about this arrangement as racial segregation was rampant. The blacks could not mingle with the whites and they were not welcome in places where whites dominated. Only whites were allowed in the city centers and this pushed the blacks to the less glamorous reserves. This segregation also affected the employment sector where blacks were only given the low ranks. A curfew that restricted their movement was operational. They were not allowed out of their houses at particular times (Ankomah).

### **Nationalist Movements of the Belgian Congo**

Nationalist movements were in place during Belgian's rule but they looked down on them thus they went on unnoticed. Some religious and regional groups were opposed to these nationalist movements and formed their own. These movements pressurized Belgium to grant them independence as they were opposed to her rule. Belgian was not comfortable with this arrangement because she felt that this would evict her from her richest colony. A movement by the name ABAKO was formed in 1950 and this represented the ethno-religious groups (Breuilly 200).

In 1956, the Nationalist Movement of the Belgian Congo was formed. It was otherwise known as the Mouvement National Congolais (MNC) headed by Patrice Lumumba. This party's main agenda was to turn Congo into a self government. It gained popularity among the Congolese natives and spread widely to six provinces. Due to internal pressures within the party, a splinter group led by Albert Kalonji departed. This party took the title Mouvement National Congolais - Kalonji. This split however did not affect the Lumumba's party which was now referred to as Mouvement National Congolais - Lumumba. It proved to be very influential in the politics of Belgian Congo. It was seen as a threat to the Belgian government because they could smell their downfall. March 1959 saw national-wide riots which were dubbed ' Leopoldville'. This move further terrorized the Belgian government which saw to the legalization of the national movements which had been formed so far. This was a mighty revolution and the political parties formed an alliance (Absolute Astronomy, par. 8).

### **Factors that led to the rise of Nationalism**

Belgian saw Congo as a tribal country that was only kept together through their rule. Patrice Lumumba was a unifying leader and worked hard to change this perceived attitude of the Congolese citizens by Belgians. He sought to bring them together by sowing in them seeds of unity and harmony against the Belgians who were typical racialists. He was not afraid to speak his mind before the Belgians whenever he had a chance. He publicly talked about the abuse the Congolese natives got from the government in power. He talked about the hard labor they were subjected to, the beatings and the taunts they suffered in the hands of the Belgians. All

this they got because of their skin color; they were black. He referred to them as ' mes freres du race' meaning ' my brothers of race'. This was supposed to signify the bond brought about by the stance they took against racial discrimination.

Lumumba's calls for nationalism were not taken kindly by the Belgian government. The least they would have wanted was rebellion from the people who gave them the layout they needed for their exploits. This landed Lumumba jail terms every now and then but he was not about to give up. He and his co-fighters would be charged with sedition. The key Nationalist Movement of the Belgian Congo led by Lumumba aimed at ensuring that the Belgian government lived to their promise of granting Congo independence with no strings attached. The movement also planned to boycott all the elections organized by the Belgian government. This they would use as a leeway to gain control over police, the armed forces and the colonial apparatus which were already in place. Their plan had been well made and they saw themselves ridding Congo of the Belgian rule with time. They looked forward to end the dominance that Belgium had over Congo (Greenholt, par. 2-4).

The movement also looked at empowering the Congolese citizens by ensuring that they benefited from the country's natural resources. This would raise their living standards and put them at par with other developed nations of the world. This movement was peace loving and saw this whole transition as peaceful. This did not thereby necessitate the formation of armed forces. Lumumba was a dedicated leader who was determined to empower his people. He was a passionate speaker and in one of his

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speeches he said the following; “ Mistakes have been made in Africa in the past, but we are ready to work with the powers which have been in Africa to create a powerful new bloc. If this effort fails, it will be through the fault of the West” (Greenholt).

This showed that his movement was more determined than ever to work out a clean deal with the colonizers not unless they were hard-hearted. Belgium honored her promise to grant Congo independence which came with so many strings attached. They saw Lumumba and his nationalist party as a threat to their plan and embarked on a war against him. This saw the Belgian bureaucrats vacate the offices with all records, files and telephones as they paved way for Lumumba’s government. They were working hard literally to sabotage him (Revolutionary worker, par. 5).

### **Impact of the Nationalist Movement of Belgian Congo to Congo’s politics**

The people of Congo had eagerly waited for this day when they would finally rid themselves of the colonialism demon which had chocked them for the longest time. These people had not known peace and hope did not exist in their vocabulary. They had been exploited and tormented by the Belgian colonialists. They had not lived to enjoy the fruits of their hard labor which benefited a few in the society. They worked tirelessly to fatten these colonialists’ bank accounts with proceeds from their rich heritage. They had someone to thank specially for this dream of freedom come true. This was none other than Patrice Lumumba. He takes much credit for the revolution that brought immense change in Congo (Revolutionary worker).

Congo's Independence Day was long awaited for and a Belgian King by the name Baudouin I had to show up in person to hand over the independence hat to the people of this nation. The independence ceremony took place in Leopoldville. Joseph Kasavubu was sworn in as the President and Patrice Lumumba as the Prime Minister. King Baudouin I came with the hopes that he would still be closely associated with this nation and somehow continue the exploits which his country, Belgium had enjoyed over the years (Revolutionary Worker).

One Lumumba saw this coming and was not happy at all. This Prime Minister could not be hoodwinked just like that. It was with this spirit therefore that he addressed all the people who had assembled. He revisited the hardships and abuse that the Congolese natives had suffered under the Belgian government's rule. He went ahead to lay down his portfolio on the future and the hopes he had for his beloved people and country, Congo. This speech was a bitter pill for King Baudouin I to swallow and Lumumba's coalition partners were shocked. They had not seen this coming. This became Lumumba's most famous speech. In this speech he mourned the distress and the problems that they had to go through as the natives of Congo under the Belgian colonialism but celebrates that at least now the leadership of the country was under the natives (Revolutionary Worker).

" All that, my brothers, we have endured. But we, whom the vote of your elected representatives have given the right to direct our dear country, we who have suffered in our body and in our heart from colonial oppression, we tell you very loud, all that is henceforth ended. The Republic of the Congo



has been proclaimed, and our country is now in the hands of its own children" (Revolutionary Worker).

This speech was so powerful and greatly moved the audience. The wounds they had suffered under the colonialists were now fresher than ever. The pain they felt was deep and they felt used. Their eyes were opened once more to the atrocities that had been committed to them in their own country by these selfish people. What they overlooked was that Belgian still had control over their country through the military. The Belgians had under their arms Congo's police force and army safely tucked. The country's wealth was still under Belgian's mineral corporations. Her strategy was to ensure that the country was in the hands of imperialists who they would manipulate to ensure that their stakes remained productive for their own selfish gain (Revolutionary Worker).

Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba was therefore a stumbling block to this move. This prompted the imperialist agents to assassinate him on 18th January 1961, soon after he was sworn in as Prime Minister at a tender age of 35. This was after he underwent a lot of injustices and mistreatment which included a house arrest, brutalization and torture in the hands of Colonel Mobutu's men. Mobutu had been played a key role in ensuring that the Belgian government stakes were safeguarded. He was their informer and they manipulated him to gain their ground. He was their puppet (The Internationalist, par. 1).

Lumumba's assassination came as a great shock to the people he fought for relentlessly. It also served as an eye opener to them that it would take

shedding of blood to gain total liberation from the colonialists. The people of Congo had viewed him as their savior and in fact saw him as a black Christ who had sacrificed his life for the sake of his people. So many people were enraged at his death that numerous paintings were done depicting him as a great hero. One of such paintings was that of his portrait inside the map of Congo. Another painting shows him breaking off the chains off his arms and at the same time raising the flag of Congo (The Museum of Arts). A week before his assassination, Lumumba wrote a letter to his wife, Pauline Lumumba. This is what the letter dated January 1961 had;

“ No brutality, mistreatment, or torture has ever forced me to ask for grace, for I prefer to die with my head high, my faith unshakable, and my confidence profound in the destiny of my country, rather than to live in submission and scorn of sacred principles. History will one day have its say, but it will not be the history that Brussels, Paris, Washington, or the United Nations will teach, but that which they will teach in the countries emancipated from colonialism and its puppets” (Revolutionary Worker, par. 6).

## **Conclusion**

The nationalist movements of Belgian Congo worked hard to redeem a people who had been oppressed. The Congolese people had been subjected to hard labor, slavery, racial discrimination, starvation, murders and all sorts of mistreatment. These movements enlightened the people of Congo on the evils of the colonialists. Their aim was to get their country back, their freedom and their dignity, all which they had lost to the Belgian government. There was a price to pay and they were not afraid. Patrice Lumumba paid

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with his life but the struggle did not end there. He had indeed fought a good fight that led to the liberation of his people from this dehumanizing rule initiated by King Leopold II. Were it not for the nationalist movements of Belgian Congo, these atrocities would have continued and independence would have been a far away dream for the Congolese people.