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CONGO OVERVIEW

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Environment

Straddling the equator, the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville) borders [the Democratic Republic of Congo](#) (Congo-Kinshasa) in the south and east, [the Central African Republic](#) and [Cameroon](#) in the north, and [Gabon](#) in the west. In the south-west, the Congo borders the Cabinda exclave of [Angola](#) and the Atlantic Ocean. Congo is sparsely populated outside of southern urban centres; much of the north is swampland. Tropical climate and vegetation predominate, but the climate is drier and cooler towards the ocean. The Republic of Congo has offshore oil reserves.

Peoples

Main languages: Lingala, Koutouba or Kikongo, Téké, French (official)

Main religions: indigenous beliefs, syncretic Christianity, Islam

Minority groups include Bakongo 1.8 million (48%), Batéké 630,000 (17%), M'Boshi 445,000 (12%) and BaAka 7,000–15,000.

[Note: Population percentages come from the 2006 CIA World Factbook, and are converted to numbers using the CIA estimate for total population of 3.7 million. For BaAka, Ethnologue estimates a population of 15,000 as of 1986]

The largest ethnic cluster is Bakongo, constituting 48 per cent of the population. Traditionally cassava farmers and fishing people, Bakongo women in particular are noted (sometimes with animosity) for their enterprise in cash-cropping and especially in trade. They have stood out as assiduous organizers, especially in religion and politics. Bakongo are also numerous in western Democratic Republic of the Congo and north-western Angola. The Bakongo heartland in the Congo is the south, where they are divided into competing subgroups, Laari and Vili. Along the Congo River at Brazzaville/Pool, Laari are the most numerous Bakongo sub-group and the one historically most advantaged by schooling and commoditization. In the Congo's second city Pointe Noire, on the coast, where the Congo's oil revenues are derived, Vili people are numerous.

Batéké, the second major ethnic cluster, comprises about 17 per cent of the population. Their home terrain is forested country to the north of Brazzaville, extending into southern Gabon. They are well represented in the Cuvette region in the middle-north. Colonial interests dispossessed most Batéké of land and marginalized them as labourers in the forest industries and towns.

The third and smallest of the main ethnic clusters, Boulanguai, are found mainly in the north and in Brazzaville. M'Boshi, who account for about 12 per cent of the country's population, form its largest group. Among its sub-groups are Likoula and Kouyou people. M'Boshi-Kouyou have been well represented in the armed forces, especially the officer corps.

A nomadic forest people, BaAka, also known by the derogatory term Babinga ('Pygmies'), number from 7,000 to 15,000. The BaAka live in the north, along the border with Central African Republic, Cameroon and Gabon. From the 1930s onward, public authorities and the Catholic Church have worked to sedentarize them. Historically able to evade forced labour, some BaAka were reported in the 1990s working in semi-slavery in northern forest enterprises. Their future as a distinct cultural group depends greatly on the vulnerable forest ecology. Those forests are under great pressure from rapacious and mainly illegal logging. In deals made between the timber companies and government agents, BaAka people have no voice.

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History

Mbuti ('pygmy') people are indigenous to the area of today's Republic of Congo, and were later joined by [Bantu](#) groups, who established complex societies two thousand years ago, and by the 15th century had formed kingdoms. The largest of these was the Kingdom of Kongo, which extended in all directions from the mouth of the Congo River. Portuguese explorers arrived towards the end of the 15th century, followed by missionaries. Slave traders arrived soon after, and engaged in booming business with the Kingdom of Kongo, which had previously applied the practice in local wars of conquest. The European connection accelerated slave raids and contributed to a significant depopulation of the continent's interior. As the slave trade was abating and the Kingdom of Kongo was nearing its end, French explorer Pierre de Brazza secured treaties with the Batéké people in 1880 that ceded lands to the north of the river as a French

protectorate.

France soon took inspiration from Belgian King Leopold II's lucrative looting of the Congo Free State (today's Democratic Republic of Congo) across the river and granted concessions to private companies in their new colony. The companies committed numerous atrocities against the indigenous population and made wide use of forced, unpaid labour. French concessionary companies set an enduring pattern of coercive labour practices and ecological destruction at the outset of the colonial period.

In 1910 France grouped 'Middle Congo' (today's Congo), Ubangi-Chari (today's Central African Republic), Chad and Gabon into the colony of French Equatorial Africa, with its administrative centre in Brazzaville, on the banks of the Congo. This decision contributed to a trend of urbanization lasting into today's Republic of Congo and drew diverse peoples from around the territory to Brazzaville. In the late 1920s, in reaction to continuing brutality and forced labour, African peoples launched a protracted rebellion against the concessionary companies. Construction of the Congo-Ocean railway had resulted in the deaths of over 17,000 Congolese. An independence movement took shape in the 1940s, and in 1946 Middle Congo was allowed to elect territorial representatives and have representation in the French parliament. In 1958 the territory became an autonomous unit within French Equatorial Africa and changed its name to Congo Republic.

Ethnicity had become highly politicized during the colonial period, as France viewed the coastal Laari and Vili sub-groups of the Bakongo people first encountered by Europeans as more capable of assimilation and education, while peoples of the interior such as the M'Boshi, who were encountered later, were seen as backwards and warrior-like. Thus while the Bakongo were groomed for administration and their elites assimilated to a greater extent, the M'Boshi and other interior peoples became over-represented in the military and police, and resentful of southern, coastal privilege. Colonial administration and construction of the Congo-Ocean railway had drawn diverse Congolese to the urban centre of the colony's administrative hub in Brazzaville, and in 1959 ethnic tensions erupted into rioting and neighbourhood segregation between northerners and southerners.

In November 1960 the Republic of Congo became independent, and a Laari leader who had roots in a syncretic Christian cult with a wide Laari following, Fulbert Youlou, became president. France retained strong influence and backed Youlou, but by 1963 the president had angered his political base by unleashing the army on the cult, and faced broad labour unrest as well as growing anger among the marginalized M'Boshi, who dominated the army. Southern control also led to jostling for power that split the Bakongo into Laari and Vili factions. When the unions called a general strike and rioting grew out of control in August 1963, France refused to come to Youlou's assistance. He fled the country and ceded control to the military. A military junta created a one-party socialist state under the Mouvement National de la Révolution (MNR) and installed Alphonse Massamba-Debat, another Laari, as president. Massamba-Debat had to contend with factionalism among the various pillars of the regime, including the continuing north-south divide. One faction, the Jeunesse MNR (JMNR) youth wing of the party, developed its own militia that received Cuban and Soviet support. As JMNR influence grew at the expense of the army, the military leadership grew increasingly angry. Following an army mutiny supported by officers of various ethnicity but also with some ethnic overtones, a weakened Massamba-Debat remained in office until a creeping coup finally ousted him in September 1968. Military commander Marien Ngouabi, became party leader and president.

Ngouabi inherited the problem of factionalism within the regime; tensions persisted between Marxists and Maoists, Catholic conservatives and cultist radicals, and northerners and southerners. As a Kouyou northerner, he tried to play down ethnic rivalries with the majority Bakongo southerners, but many Laari in particular were distrustful. In 1970 Ngouabi renamed the country the 'People's Republic of the Congo' and the MNR to 'Parti Congolais du Travail' (PCT). Years of internal political turbulence culminated in Ngouabi's assassination in March 1977. The circumstances surrounding the assassination remain murky, but the regime blamed 'tribalism'; diverse regime critics were rounded up, including former president Massamba-Debat, who was executed.

General Joachim Yhombi Opango, a Laari but from the north, succeeded Ngouabi. During his tenure, power shifted from the PCT to the army, and the influence of northerners grew more dominant. Powerful defence minister Denis Sassou-Nguesso out-manoeuvred Opango and in 1979 the PCT removed Opango as leader. In March 1979 Sassou-Nguesso, an M'Boshi, became president.

During the 1980s north-south tensions persisted, but Sassou-Nguesso managed political turmoil through numerous purges and crackdowns, and with the support of the Soviet Union. With the end of the Cold War Soviet assistance ceased, and in 1990 the PCT abandoned Marxism. With the economy in tatters and various factions nursing grievances, domestic and international pressure mounted on Sassou-Nguesso to open up the political system. In 1991 he convened a national conference of 1,500 diverse delegates from around the country. Although Sassou-Nguesso attempted to control the conference, the three-month meeting took on a life of its own, and by June 1991 had drafted a new constitution that would establish multi-party democracy. The constitution was adopted by referendum in 1992, and in June 1992 elections, Sassou-Nguesso came in third and the PCT won only 19 of 125 seats in parliament. Pascal Lissouba, a southerner of the tiny Nzabi people who had been prime minister under President Massamba-Debat, became president after a run-off election.

Congo's attempt at democratic transition received little international support, and the Lissouba government soon faced rebellion within the M'Boshi-dominated armed forces that remained largely loyal to Sassou-Nguesso, as well as conflict with party-based militias operated along ethnic lines. The M'Boshi faction took the name 'Cobras', the president commanded the loyalty of a Bakongo faction called 'Coyotes', and the Laari formed a faction called the 'Ninjas'. An estimated 2,000 people were killed in fighting during the second half of 1993. Clashes continued until cease-fire arrangements in 1994 and 1995 brought opposition leaders into government.

One month before elections scheduled for July 1997, vicious fighting erupted again as warlord factions scrambled for power, and control over Congo's offshore oil wealth. France and Angola threw their weight behind Sassou-Nguesso, whose faction prevailed after five months of full civil war that killed thousands and displaced some 700,000 people in the south. Elections were cancelled and the constitution suspended, as skirmishes continued.

The Republic of Congo has continued its pattern of conflict and dictatorship, and Sassou-Nguesso has held onto power.

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Governance

Sassou-Nguesso entered into a peace agreement with rebel factions in 1999, and a referendum approved a new constitution in January 2002. The new document kept a multi-party system, but banned parties organized along regional or ethnic lines, and removed many of the checks and balances built into the 1992 constitution. In March 2002 elections marred by the banning of two main candidates and the

boycott of a third, Sassou-Nguesso won a seven-year term with almost 90 per cent of the vote; his PCT party and its allies won around 90 per cent of the seats in parliament. The Laari militia called the 'Ninjas', aligned with one of the banned presidential candidates—former prime minister Bernard Kolelas—again took up arms against the government. Intense fighting in the southern Pool region displaced thousands. In 2003 the government signed a peace agreement with the Ninjas, restoring relative peace.

70 per cent of Congo's people live in poverty. Corruption in the oil industry remains rampant despite the government's agreement in 2003 to publish information on oil revenues. In 2004, the Republic of Congo was suspended from the Kimberley Process, the international mechanism intended to end the sale of 'blood diamonds'. International monitors found that the country was exporting more diamonds than could be accounted for through local production, which pointed to smuggling of diamonds from neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo.

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

Following the end of fighting in the southern Pool region, which was hit hardest during Congo's civil war, a large number of displaced persons returned. Between 2000 and 2005 the population of Pool nearly doubled. The influx has not been met by a commensurate rebuilding of infrastructure, resulting in housing shortages, a lack of access to clean water for 92 per cent of the population, and high rates of malnutrition.

By August 2006 around 17,500 former 'Ninja', 'Coyote' and 'Cobra' militants had gone through a Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration programme run by an internationally-backed government High Commission for Reintegration. But the NGO Small Arms Survey estimated in early 2006 that Congo remained awash in 37,000-40,000 weapons. Many 'Ninjas' of the Laari group remain armed, and now use their weapons to harass and steal from the local population in the Pool region.

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