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Patrice Émery Lumumba

Patrice Émery Lumumba (1925–61), a Congolese leader of the nationalist independence movement against Belgian colonialism and co-founder of the Mouvement National Congolais (MNC) in 1958, was the first Prime Minister of what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo from June 1960 until September 1960, when he was removed from office by a confluence of forces under the direction of President Joseph Kasavubu, Colonel Joseph Désiré Mobutu, and Belgian and American officials.

Lumumba was born in Onalua in the Katako-Kombe district of Sankuru in the Kasai province of the Belgian Congo and educated by Protestant missionaries. He was registered as an *évolué* and worked as a postal clerk and as a charismatic salesman, an image made famous first in Aimé Césaire's play *Une Saison au Congo* (1967) and then in Raoul Peck's biographical film *Lumumba* (2000). He became active in the independence movements in the mid-1950s and began a career as a journalist and writer, editing a Congolese postal workers' newspaper *L'Écho*, and writing for *La Voix du Congolais*, *La Croix du Congo* and the Belgium-based, *L'Afrique et le Monde*. In 1956, he sent a manuscript to Brussels entitled, *Le Congo, terre d'avenir est-il menacé?* (published posthumously in 1961). His anti-colonial ideas brought him to the attention of Belgian officials who thought they might redirect his political activism by inviting him to visit Brussels in 1956. After his arrest in 1957, on trumped-up charges of embezzlement, he returned to Leopoldville (Kinshasa) and gained political prominence as one of a group of anti-colonial leaders who sent a memorandum to M. Cornelis, the Governor-General of the Belgian Congo, demanding independence and African participation in governance. Later that year, he helped found MNC and attended the All African Peoples' Conference in Accra organised by George Padmore and convened by Kwame Nkrumah in the independent nation of Ghana to study the question of African independence. He was subsequently arrested for anti-colonial activities in 1959 about the same time that the government in Brussels revealed a five-year plan for independence. Despite being in prison, Lumumba was elected Prime Minister. In 1960 Lumumba was released from prison to attend a conference in Brussels at which the date for independence was moved up to June of that same year. On 23 June 1960, the first government of Congo was established by Lumumba and Kasavubu. At the independence day ceremonies on 30 June, Lumumba gave his famous speech about the daily denigration and humiliation of the Congolese by Belgian colonists.

In September 1960, United Nations troops arrived to quell unrest in Congo, but Lumumba was put under house arrest after a coup d'état led by Mobutu (later President Mobutu Sese Seko) and supported by Kasavubu. These two leaders in turn were supported by Belgium and the USA in their attempts to eliminate Lumumba. The United Nations troops positioned outside Lumumba's home to protect him did not see him escape in late 1960. He was re-arrested by Mobutu's soldiers on 1 December 1960 during his failed attempt to reach supporters in Stanleyville (Lumumbashi). United Nations Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld appealed to Kasavubu to make sure that Lumumba was treated humanely. However, Lumumba was delivered with two other MNC leaders, Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito, from the military prison in Thysville to his enemy, Katanga secessionist leader Moïse Tshombe. Lumumba was tortured, and executed along with Mpolo and Okito by Katangese soldiers, while under the supervision of Tshombe and Belgian officers in the mineral-rich province of Katanga, on 17 January 1961. His death was not announced until three weeks later.

Many historians and political scientists consider the assassination of Lumumba as the event that has most profoundly affected post-independent Africa and led to violence and upheaval in Congo. Historian Madeleine Kalb examined hundreds of cross-continental cables from the 1950s and 1960s and determined that the CIA and President Eisenhower conspired to poison Lumumba and were aware of Belgian activities surrounding Lumumba's death. In *The Assassination of Lumumba* Belgian historian, Ludo de Witte, used the same data as a book that had exonerated Belgium, to conclude that the Belgian government was deeply involved in Lumumba's death. In 2002, after an extensive parliamentary investigation, the Belgian government issued an apology to the Congolese people and released a statement accepting 'moral responsibility' for the murder of Patrice Lumumba. Remembered by nationalist leaders as a fallen giant, Lumumba is often hailed in politically engaged literature and film of the African diaspora for his important principles of African independence and unity. He is celebrated in the philosophical writings of Jean-Paul Sartre; in photos, paintings, and *pagne* designs in the films of Ousmane Sembene; as the subject of two films by Raoul Peck and a play by Aimé Césaire; and is featured most recently in a novel by Barbara Kingsolver.

Carina Yervasi

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