

Political Instability as Root of Armed Conflict in DRC

Abstract

The political instability and formation of armed groups in the modern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) started during military government's era. However, the Belgian government established an oppressive culture, which segregated certain communities from the onset. After the economic depression of 1991, the DRC was disengaged from the global situations encompassing the political environment. Political instabilities characterized military government's regime because of the oppressive policies he borrowed from the colonial masters. Various rebel groups helped president to fight the bad governance established during military government's rule. After president ascended to power, he continued with the same oppressions from the previous regime. Historically, the Kivus initiated most of the violence because of the periodic instability in DRC. The eastern DRC was neglected despite being part of the country for several years. The governmental benefits were selective as some communities were considered foreigners from colonial segregation. As a result, these communities formed armed groups to fight for their space within the country.

Keywords: Political Instability, armed groups, Democratic Republic of Congo.

Introduction

Several areas in The Democratic Republic of Congo have continually experienced turmoil for over two decades. The unending unrest is caused by the armed conflicts mainly established in the early 1990s after thousands of Rwandese refugees migrated to the DRC in search of safety (Dagne, 2011). As the refugees migrated to the DRC, there was increased strife

between the locals and refugees. Different armed groups arose from the migration, leading to several rebel movements (Dagne, 2011). The rebel groups were first formed during military strikes to topple military government. Since the toppling of military government, the DRC has continually experienced armed conflicts caused by internal and external political instabilities.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has experienced dwindling humanitarian rights and a severe security crisis. The security condition in the DRC was worsened by the 1994 Rwandan genocide when the country experienced a massive refugee spillover. After the genocide, Rwandan Hutu moved to the eastern DRC, where various armed groups were formed. Several rebel groups arose from the movement, indicating the result of political action from the country of origin. From the security crisis, 4.5 million have already been displaced from their homes (Hoffmann et al., 2020). About 2.2 million children are on the brink of starvation, and millions of refugees have moved to neighboring countries like Uganda, Tanzania, and Angola (Hoffmann et al., 2020). The displacement experienced in DRC is more than in any other country on the African continent.

After the 1997 war, president fell out with his allies. The Rwandan and Ugandan military groups that pushed him to power became a piece of baggage he needed to offload. As a result, an armed confrontation ensued. Uganda and Rwanda became president's fiercest enemies, an encounter that saw president lose serious military battles (Dagne, 2011). president sought a new partnership with Namibia, Angola, and Zimbabwe by allowing their troops to occupy DRC to contain the armed rebels. The new grouping led to the breaking out of the regional war that saw more than 3 million people die between 1998 and 2003 (Autesserre, 2006). Although the clashing armed groups caused the deaths, political instability played a significant role. President needed to protect his territory, but he died by assassination by his bodyguard.

Between 1998 and 2003, the DRC government fought several rebel groups. The operations were supported by neighboring countries such as Angola, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. However, most of the rebel groups had support from Uganda and Rwanda in an encounter called the Second Congo War (Autesserre, 2006). The rebel groups had support from different states, making the war highly political. The battle continued even after DRC made a peace deal in 2002. After the formation of a transitional government in 2003, certain rebel groups still targeted civilians (Autesserre, 2006). Armed groups attacked innocent civilians because of poor governance and security operations. With the growth of weak institutions within the country, the rebel groups took advantage of corrupt officials to disrupt peace and stability. The stability of Kinshasa is significant for DRC's political and economic progression since it is the concentration of legitimate power. From the eastern side, the Kivus (rebellion group from military government) has continually targeted Kinshasa (Shamamba et al., 2021). When the capital is unstable, it symbolizes the nation's condition.

The political differences between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo worsened the situation of armed conflict. For instance, among the most prominent armed groups in DRC is the March 23 Movement (M23), primarily composed of the Tutsis (Shamamba et al., 2021). The Tutsis originated from Rwanda, and their goal of creating instability was politically instigated. The rebel group had the full support of the Rwandan government, which enjoyed relative peace and instability during the 2009 period. Specifically, the rebellion by the M23 group was caused by the Congolese government reneging on the 2009 peace deal (Dagne, 2011). In response, the Congolese government marshaled its soldiers with the support of the United Nations to contain the armed groups causing instability in the country. In 2013, the group was defeated, but others emerged to create continuity of the country's instability.

The Pretoria Agreement, signed on December 16, 2002, had substantial proposals to lead the country in a better direction. The agreement detailed how the DRC would establish a negotiated framework that enabled the country to develop a transitional government to cater to different interests (Muraya & Ahere, 2014). The political environment had become so heated that its internal mechanisms were insufficient to contain the problem. It was agreed that DRC would move forward with the international community's help managing provincial and national elections. Specifically, the agreement moved to ensure all the warring parties resolve their differences and the use of armed military minimized. However, the eastern side of DRC's capital Kinshasa still experienced dissensions (Muraya & Ahere, 2014). Political might and the desire to control the country fractured the desire for consolidation resulting in further political instability.

The Democratic Republic of Congo has massive untapped wealth estimated at more than \$24 trillion. The country's wealth has been a source of political instability resulting in the current insecurity from armed groups witnessed in the country. All governmental operations are dependent on minerals as the major economic activity. The rebel groups also use the minerals as their source of funds that support their operations, such as purchasing firearms. In 2010, the United States passed a law requiring a reduction in purchasing certain conflict minerals to avoid funding militia groups (Muraya & Ahere, 2014). However, the DRC has a complex supply chain system that makes it hard to control the purchase of such minerals. The government is in a constant tussle with the militia groups over the control of resources. Such activities are caused by political instability resulting in armed conflict in the country.

Since the 1960s, Eastern DRC has been marred with armed conflicts influenced by political instability. The fulness of conflicts was encountered when the desire to control Bukavu. Bukavu is one of the capitals of Kivu province bordering Rwanda. Two generals, Prosper

Nyabiolwa and Colonel Jules Mutebutsi marshaled their loyal soldiers to fight for the capital's control. Colonel Mutebutsi was supported by General Laurent Nkunda, a Tutsi leader of a rebel group controlling part of Kivu. The region experienced instability because of the individual need for control. For several decades, the eastern DRC failed to recognize Kinshasa as its capital. Although most rebel generals were incorporated into the legitimate government, continued political instability creates some hope for ease of control. Various factions capitalize on political instability to strengthen their armed groups for conflicts.

From the eastern DRC, the conflicts have become complex because of the combination of genuine grievances among the players and their responsibility for gross human rights violations. In the entire country, the eastern DRC has the highest population of armed groups with rising insecurity rates (Ekyamba, 2022). For instance, several Congolese armed groups combined forces with Rwandese and Ugandan troops to cause regional instability. The vulnerability of the eastern region is the primary cause for the success of the various armed groups (Muraya & Ahere, 2014). Most groups have patrimonial lines and community directions based on the support received in past activities.

Historically, political instability was caused by communal differences and the need to control the population. Armed groups formed alliances to fight for their space within the country, especially the control of the most strategic areas in the DRC (Hoffmann et al., 2020). Several wars were won because of these alliances, creating unwritten pacts between the different communities. With different regimes, the reorganization of various armed groups occurred. Armed groups establish their allegiances from communal or historical support as different political issues arise, thus promoting reorganization (Muraya & Ahere, 2014). For instance, groups that received support from Rwanda before are more likely to form an alliance or pledge

allegiance with them. Specifically, the M23 group reemerged in 2003 with the support of Rwanda through military tactics, weapons, and more personnel to resist the new DRC regime (Autesserre, 2006). Slight provocations would lead to major wars, hence the contribution of political instability to armed groups.

Between 2003 and 2006, there was relative peace in the DRC because of the formed political settlements. Although there were political formations, the intense need and struggle for power remained (Autesserre, 2006). However, the armed groups formed political parties to bargain for their fair share of the government. DRC experienced a period of relative peace when the rebel groups were included in governmental operations. The political temperatures reduced for the first time in a decade, and the country received relative stability (Autesserre, 2006). With the increasing political stability, the actions of various armed groups were stopped. The fight for control and power was no longer on the battlefield but through policies fronted by the political parties (Autesserre, 2006). The years between 2003 and 2006 confirmed that political stability reduced the armed group actions as the grounds for wars were eliminated.

For the 70 years under the Belgian government, DRC did not build sufficient capacity for power and self-governance. The Congolese were exploited economically, socially, and politically, making them unprepared for independence since they lacked the needed infrastructure to run a functional government (Hoffmann et al., 2020). The country was left in confusion as anarchy became the order of operation. During the colonial period, the Belgian government failed to prioritize proper leadership among the African elite to enable them to manage the political challenges that came with independence. The Congolese elites proved incapable of handling the rising political issues within the country, creating anarchy through military, political, racial, and ethnic instabilities that proved hard to handle. The first coup

attempt by military officer was primarily composed of university graduates who were susceptible to influence (Muraya & Ahere, 2014). After the military officer fall, civil service was marred with political interests ensuing dissensions from various factions and communities. Political leaders appointed people close to them while ignoring the other communities. As a result, diverse ethnic communities resorted to armed conflicts to air their grievances, thus the impact of political instability.

In Kivu, governance was a contentious issue as the locals questioned Kinshasa's authority within the region. Historically, Kivu has always wanted to be an independent state and expected its governance to be decentralized. Since the Second Congo War, Kivu's rebellion has always been on their identity. The issue of centralized political and military action became an issue of concern, especially with Kinshasa's continued desire to influence the region (Muraya & Ahere, 2014). At the same time, Kinshasa views itself as the source of DRC's legitimate government, and its influence should be felt in all spheres of the country (Hoffmann et al., 2020). For example, the attempted redeployment of Bosco Ntaganda, a Kivu from the eastern DRC, contributed to the M23 rebellion. Further redeployment of officers from Tutsi confirmed Kinshasa's desire to centralize its power and control eastern politics. Such authorities led to disagreements that caused the development of armed conflicts within the region.

One significant political issue is the imposition of artificial borders that ignored the placement patterns that were useful for people in the country. The colonial systems established civic and ethnic governments (Shamamba et al., 2021). The governments had different purposes, as the central state oversaw the operations of civic law while local authorities were responsible for ethnic requirements. Ideally, all citizens should have equal governmental rights, land ownership and resource distribution, but these have been reserved for loyalists (Ekyamba, 2022).

However, some communities living in North Kivu, the eastern part of DRC, were ignored despite living in the area for over three centuries (Hoffmann et al., 2020). The communities had no land rights since they were excluded from ethnic citizenship. These communities were also accused of lacking native authority and hence no customary access. The artificial borders created political instabilities as the native communities from the eastern DRC felt undervalued, leading to the development of armed groups in retaliation.

With the dual legal system, ethnic divides became worse, especially for people living within the region. After the end of colonialism, such discriminatory patterns were not solved in subsequent governments. military government failed to include Tutsis in DRC's dual citizenship (Shamamba et al., 2021). In addition, the leader excluded the eastern community from economic empowerment programs and security that denied them the opportunity to obtain their needed stability. The Tutsis were also denied access to national identification documents despite being granted citizenship through the statutory framework established in 1972 (Dagne, 2011). The acknowledgment was only on paper, as the community did not enjoy the benefits of being DRC citizens. Because of this exclusion, the community felt the need to fight for their space within the government. Armed groups were formed to resist perceived oppressive governmental policies that denied them a chance to equitable resource distribution and land access.

Besides, the Rwandan genocide created a permanent mistrust between the Hutus and Tutsis despite the latter moving to the neighboring DRC. Because of the mistrust, the Tutsis believed they could be attacked anytime, increasing their alarm (Ekyamba, 2022). Specifically, the community lived under a pre-emptive engagement that saw them form various armed groups as a prevention mechanism. The armed groups attacked its neighboring communities as a defense mechanism to create fear among the locals (Ekyamba, 2022). The Tutsis sought alliances with

other groups to protect their interests within the country. Various armed groups took control of North Kivu's cities to counter the central leadership influence. In response, president sought the support of Mai-Mai groups to counter the rising influence of eastern armed communities (Muraya & Ahere, 2014). Instead of fighting the community influence, the DRC leader established them for his gain. The increasing political instability became the basis for strengthening the armed groups, thus promoting their influence in different parts of the country.

As the desire to suppress the Tutsi population in the eastern DRC grew, the government saw the formation of separate armed groups to perform its role. Through the advice and support of president, local authorities at Kivu formed the Mai-Mai comprising the Nyanga, Hunde, and Nande militia groups (Muraya & Ahere, 2014). The armed group was designed to contain the increasing Tutsi influence and dominance in Kivu. The political instability created by the fear of toppling governmental operations led to the formation of further armed groups within the country. Mai-Mai groups countered the influence of Rwandan troops that supported and sympathized with the Tutsis living in eastern DRC. Such formations became the basis for creating new armed groups that caused further regional insecurity.

From the duration of military government regime, kleptocracy and massive corruption were the order of government. The president used his powers to divert public resources for personal gain as he fraudulently enriched himself. Governmental operations and benefits were reserved for the few individuals surrounding the president while storing their plunder in offshore accounts (Shamamba et al., 2021). Police officers and subordinate governmental staff extorted the public as they amassed public resources. Massive corruption was the primary reason for the 1980s to 1990s DRC economic collapse (Muraya & Ahere, 2014). Millions of common citizens wallowed in poverty as the minority grew richer through public resources. There was a sharp

distinction between the rich and poor individuals within the country. The segregation was worse for the eastern DRC as they did not enjoy any slight benefits from the plunders. Through massive corruption, political instability ensued. The eastern DRC formed armed groups to resist the oppressive political regime and governmental policies.

Lastly, political regimes are more concerned about rewarding loyalists than seeking the country's stability. Since the political era, the opponents have been oppressed, and communities perceived as opposition do not enjoy governmental support. In fact, throughout that era, the governments created armed groups to counter their influence (Shamamba et al., 2021). Genuine concerns were converted to political competitions and propaganda that most plights were not addressed. Areas with mixed communities, such as Goma and Uvira, experienced cultural tussles as some groups were deemed foreigners that did not deserve a fair share of the national resources (Muraya & Ahere, 2014). Each government was characterized by alienation, prejudice, and preferences that led to the establishment of armed groups to oppose their operations. However, the first democratic elections in 2018 created new hope for different rival groups with promising political stability.

Thus, the Democratic Republic of Congo has experienced oppressive political regimes that undermine specific communities through economic and military suppressions. From the historical establishment, the Belgian colonial government caused confusion as it failed to set an effective plan for the elites to take over the country's operations. Politically, certain eastern communities, such as the Tutsis, were not viewed as legitimate DRC citizens, a confusion that originated from the colonial era. As a result, the oppressed communities formed armed groups to resist oppression and segregation. The sitting governments also formed an armed group to contain the increasing resistance from various communities, especially from eastern DRC. With

the open corruption witnessed among multiple governments, certain communities fought for fair resource distribution through their armed groups. The rising political instability is caused by military, economic, and ethnic suppression, which prompts various communities to fight for their space through armed groups.

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