

Book review

Civil Wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 1960-2010

*Emizet Francois Kisangani** 2012

London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 221 pages.

ISBN 978-158826-826-827-3

*Reviewed by Martha Mutisi
International Consultant: Peace, Security and Governance*

The book, *Civil Wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 1960-2010* by Emizet Francois Kisangani, is an analysis of the various civil wars in the Congo. As a point of departure, Kisangani gives the term 'civil wars' a new meaning because in this book, this term encompasses secession conflicts, ethnic wars, revolts, rebellions, invasions, and mutinies. After lumping these various forms of violence together as civil wars, Emizet Francois Kisangani tries to answer why the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has endured a history of protracted and changing forms of violence for the past fifty years. With such a question as a conundrum for our time, this book will be relevant to many types of readers including

* Dr Emizet Francois Kisangani is a Professor of Political Science at Kansas State University. He holds an M.A. in Economics from the University of Oregon and he received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Iowa (1994).

students of peace and security studies, conflict resolution practitioners, political scientists, international development and international relations experts as well as historians who have an interest in the genealogy of violence.

Using an elaborate analytical framework labelled as ‘process tracing’, Kisangani offers a systematic analysis of several episodes of violence in Congolese history. While the author relies mostly on secondary data to base his conclusions, his analysis demonstrates the intricate connection between micro and macro processes, portraying the multitudes of DRC conflicts as a microcosm of the national, regional and international correlates of war. One of the commendable aspects of Kisangani’s analysis is his recognition that the DRC conflicts are expressions of populations who have suffered decades of marginalisation, and patronage politics at the hands of colonisers, political elites and the international community alike.

By advancing the theory of political exclusion as the reason for the instability in the DRC, this book makes a departure from the usual primordial explanations of identity conflict in Africa. With a total of 221 pages, Kisangani’s book is a well written and persuasive piece of literature, providing articulate reasons for the persistence of the DRC’s conflicts over the past five decades. For a novice to Congolese history, this book provides an illustrative and elucidative piece of analysis which furthers the understanding of one of Africa’s intractable conflicts which has proved to be more than a handful for the regional and international community. Kisangani takes an ahistorical approach by analysing various episodes of civil wars in the DRC beginning with the Mobutu era, and then concludes with an analysis of the current 21st Century internal instability, especially in the Eastern DRC.

Kisangani analyses the conflicts in the DRC by categorising the various epochs into periods of formation, consolidation and finally collapse. The formation stage is described as the time the colonial state was consolidated by King Leopold II of Belgium. Kisangani notes that during the formation stage, the Belgian King engaged in socio-economic and political processes that were designed to exploit the country’s natural resources while unequivocally controlling the population. These processes included setting up administrative apparatus for the International Association of Congo (IAC) which was based in Brussels,

establishing an army, the Public Force, and finally passing laws. The second stage is the phase from consolidation to collapse which was essentially the Mobutu era, which lasted for thirty-two years (1965-1997). Kisangani describes the contradictions that characterised the Mobutu era; the positive side being his ability to install a strong state and a sense of nationhood among Congolese people and the negative side being Mobutu's ruthlessness, paternalism and insatiable power. In sum, Kisangani is not convinced by the positive dimension of Mobutu, labelling his more affable side as 'legitimation devices', or strategies that were designed to maintain his hold on power.

Kisangani's book manages to problematise the Congolese crisis by following the historical trajectories of various civil wars – allowing the reader to unpack the historical evolution of this conflict, which began with the Belgian King Leopold's 'coercive state apparatus' which was epitomised by 'political repression ...' (p. 13). Kisangani also highlights the roots of state paternalism in the DRC, which became evident during the Belgian colonial era and was apparent in the way in which 'Belgians isolated their colony from the world, and isolated Congolese people from one another' (p. 14).

Kisangani challenges some of the quantitative analyses of the African conflicts which do not fully interrogate data nor attempt to contextualise the findings. He exposes contradictions in some of the extant literature which had used statistical data to demonstrate how during the colonial era, the DRC was one of the most industrialised African countries (apart from South Africa). Kisangani dilutes the argument by such scholars such as Lacroix (1967) and Prunier (2009) who seem to be subtly aggrandizing the colonisers and praising them for bringing development to the DRC. For example, Kisangani disproves the statistics presented by Merlier who says that by 1958, the DRC had 35% of its adults employed, a percentage which was unmatched anywhere else in Africa. Kisangani demystifies such an analysis and exposes the 'selective observation' that typifies such assessments. Instead, he argues that it does not tell the entire story, pointing out how most of these co-called employed adults were 'unqualified workers, farm labourers and petty clerks' (p.14). Kisangani highlights how the Belgian colonial system was paternalistic, keeping natives uneducated or minimally educated. Indeed, by the time the DRC gained independence from the Belgians, it had no political elite because of the absence of an educated middle

class. Perhaps the root of insecurity and instability in this troubled country can be traced back to this system of rudimentary education for natives, which has ensured that political elites in the contemporary DRC continue to manipulate and exclude the citizens.

Kisangani dismisses the apologist explanation of ethnic conflict, explaining how identity politics were nurtured in the DRC over the past century. During the colonial era, political association was prohibited, hence native Congolese congregated around cultural groups which were known as '*evolues*'. These cultural groups naturally had ethnic undertones such as the Confederation of Tribal Associations of Katanga and the Baluba of Katanga (pp. 15-16). With these examples, Kisangani shows how ethnicisation of association had its roots in a denial of the freedom of association, which left Congolese with their ethnic identity as one of the few things that they could freely flaunt.

By categorising civil wars into groups such as 'civil war of legitimacy', 'civil war of replacements' and 'civil war of convenience' (p. 4), Kisangani furthers the notion of variability in the causes and expression of violent conflict. However, in general, Kisangani argues that despite the differences among these civil wars, the common thread is the politics of exclusion. The author posits that while historical factors might differ, the political elites tend to use exclusion as the rationale for mobilising the population to revolt or rebel.

As such, despite its claims to dissociate from extant literature, this book is somewhat reminiscent of the writings of Paul Collier who explores the theme of 'greed and grievances'. Kisangani posits that legitimacy alone is not enough to mobilise masses. He advances the notion that politically excluded elites attempt to recapture the state by mobilising the population while flaunting the tenets of democracy, human rights and accountability. In reality, the reason for the civil wars would be the political elites' quest for economic gain and consolidation of power. They continue to view government institutions as means to access power and resources. As such, Kisangani is not convinced of the genuine desire for inclusion as the driving force for the several conflicts in the DRC.

This dismissal of the DRC political leadership of all epochs by Kisangani and the imagery of continued manipulation of DRC governments by political

elites presented in this book could have resulted from the fact that there was a power vacuum, and the inability to deliver human security and development to the Congolese population. However, there are challenges with the 'greed and grievance' perspective as it tends to negate the sincere feelings of frustration and relative deprivation that compel many of the disenfranchised and excluded actors into violent conflict. Nonetheless, for a 221 page long analysis, this book does a good job of highlighting the causes of the problems in the DRC, and, by separately examining the various civil wars, offers insights into this African problematic. The author analyses several layers of the civil wars in DRC from the revolts against Mobutu to the anti-Kabila and the present-day wars which include many rebel groups.

In this analysis, Kisangani is cognizant of the role of global forces and dynamics in the DRC crisis and ensures that the reader appreciates how super-power involvement in this Central African nation dates back decades. The author takes a swipe at the United Nations, particularly highlighting how in 1960, Dag Hammarskjöld, then the United Nations Secretary-General, refused the request from the DRC Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, to end the Katanga secession. The author also briefly discusses the role of Cold War politics and the resource dimension of the DRC crisis, which resulted in the dismissal of Patrice Lumumba and a coup by Colonel Mobutu in September 1960.

While the book offers a comprehensive analysis of the DRC conflicts, it is clearly androcentric as Kisangani does not attempt to examine the gender dimension of the violence in the DRC. Yet the history of the DRC violence cannot be considered fully captured if it missed the voices of women who bore the brunt of the violence, and the women who also played a role towards shaping attempts at peacebuilding and peacemaking. Even though the book is primarily an analysis of the explanations of the violent conflict, this account still would have been more complete by adding one of the critical voices in peace and security – gender.

Even though he also uses qualitative lenses, Kisangani's interest in quantitative assessments of civil wars is reflected by his definition of civil war, which he defines by 'death toll and duration' (p. 4). This is perhaps done for pragmatic

reasons so that the author can focus on a certain cluster of forms of violence that affected the DRC. However, the challenge is that such discourse tends to result in the simplification of the reality and experience of violence.

Perhaps, one of the major challenges of this book is that it spends a lot of time focusing on the causes and explanations of the DRC conflicts to the detriment of presenting succinct strategies on how the protracted conflict can be resolved. While sustainable and effective prognosis of conflict is aided by an informed and comprehensive diagnosis of conflict, the author does not strike a good balance between conflict analysis and conflict resolution. The book borders on a historical rendition of civil wars, and for the contemporary reader who is interested in the DRC from a policymaking and practice perspective, it is quite difficult to keep up with the number of conflicts that are presented. However, in defence of the author, Kisangani's dwelling on the nature and causes of the civil wars in DRC provides a holistic perspective on the genealogy of violence in this region. In addition, towards the end of the book, Kisangani provides policy recommendations for conflict resolution. The author emphasises the centrality of the politics of exclusion in the multitude of DRC wars, and therefore highlights how any effective conflict intervention should focus on engendering inclusion and political participation.

Another recommendation emerging from Kisangani is the need to address impunity in the DRC. Specifically, Kisangani calls for the Western international community to ensure that political elites who committed over fifty years of atrocities and human rights violations in the DRC are brought to justice. For the DRC and other countries affected by violent episodes of conflict and human rights violation, this is an important issue that has taken centre stage in conflict resolution processes, particularly in the design of peace agreements and in post-conflict reconstruction strategies, including transitional justice. While impunity is a key theme in the Congolese tapestry of war, it is somewhat disappointing to note that Kisangani spends quite a great deal of his time implicating the international community in the DRC's crisis, and yet concludes by calling on their assistance. Kisangani argues that it is up to the international community to stop the rent-seeking behaviour that is currently characteristic

of the Congolese economy. Kisangani calls on the international community to 'stop wasting money on government projects that sustain rent-seeking projects,' (p. 218) and urges them instead to support research and development.

Kisangani concludes his analysis by almost extrapolating almost the exact words from the World Bank's *World Development Report: Conflict, Peace and Security (2011)* when he posits: 'Good governance and economic growth can create a virtuous circle that sustains the positive development and positive peacefulness of the polity' (p. 221). While discontent with five decades of state patronage might cause one to dismiss the role of government in the Congolese socio-economic and political fabric, utter dismissal of the role of the state seems naïve and blind to the reality that neo-liberal peace theory has not done much towards assuaging the Congolese challenge. Although the DRC conflicts have an external dimension, the tendency for the author to internationalise the DRC solution defeats the notion of ownership of African challenges.

Overall, this book provides a useful resource for scholars and practitioners for understanding the truncated and interconnected nature of conflict in the DRC, spanning more than five decades. The book is not only useful for understanding the DRC conflicts but insights thereof can be drawn and applied to the examination of the African peace and security environment. Such an analysis is useful because it foregrounds informed and context-specific transformation of the conflict.