

Dismissal of Prime Minister

The crisis in ZaVOL37re deepened as President Mobutu Sese Seko on Oct. 21 dismissed Prime Minister Etienne Tshisekedi, whom he had appointed on Sept. 30. Mobutu had come under sustained pressure to reach a power-sharing agreement with Tshisekedi, a leading figure of the opposition Democratic Union for Social Progress (UDPS) and in the opposition Sacred Union alliance, and his dismissal provoked renewed protests. When the Sacred Union met on Oct. 22 it refused Mobutu's proposal that it should name an alternative Prime Minister, and reaffirmed its support for Tshisekedi. Mobutu on Oct. 23 named Bernardin Mungul Diaka as Prime Minister; Tshisekedi responded by announcing on Oct. 31 the formation of an alternative cabinet, "in consideration of the total lack of authority of the state".

Relations between Mobutu and Tshisekedi were strained from the outset, notably over the composition of the Cabinet. Mobutu insisted that he be allowed to name the Defence Minister. Although Tshisekedi eventually conceded, Mobutu then demanded that he be allowed to nominate a further 10 ministers, giving him effective control. A 22-member Cabinet as eventually announced on Oct. 14 included four supporters of Mobutu who held the key portfolios of Defence, Foreign Affairs, Planning, and Land and Mines. The remaining 18 portfolios were held by members of opposition parties, including Fantin Birhindwa of the UDPS as Minister of Finance and Mathieu Lombeye Bosongo of the Democratic and Social Christian Party (PDSC) as Minister of the Interior.

On Oct. 16 Tshisekedi refused to recognize the authority of President Mobutu and of the Constitution in the swearing-in ceremony, following which he was barred from his office by troops loyal to the President.

After his dismissal on Oct. 21, troops fired tear gas and shots to disperse a crowd of 15,000 demonstrators in Kinshasa, while riots and looting in Lubumbashi continued for a number of days. The local media reported rioting across the country throughout the remainder of the month.

Diaka, a member of the Sacred Union who had earlier supported Tshisekedi, was severely criticized by Union members when he accepted the position of Prime Minister the following day; his membership of the Sacred Union, and that of his party, the Rally for Republican Democrats, was revoked. Diaka announced a 34-member Cabinet on Oct. 30, in which he claimed that 40 per cent of ministerial posts were taken by members of the Sacred Union. This assertion was strongly denied by Tshisekedi, who further maintained that key Cabinet positions were controlled by supporters of Mobutu, including the Defence portfolio which was given to N'gbanda Nzambo Ko Atumba, a nephew of Mobutu.

Foreign reaction

On Oct. 25 France announced the suspension of aid, and the last French troops were withdrawn on Oct. 30 in spite of calls from the opposition for them to remain to prevent more killing. Belgium advised its nationals to leave the country without delay, but refused Mobutu's demand that it withdraw its troops immediately. Mobutu resisted pressure from Western governments to enter into a power-sharing arrangement with Tshisekedi and attacked them for their "flagrant interference"; he understood, he said, "that Western aid is mixed with all sorts of threats and blackmail".

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