

Democratic Republic of Congo: The Democratization of Militarized Politics

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More than ten years after the official conclusion of the peace process, more armed groups are operating in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo than during the two Congo Wars (1996–1997, 1998–2003), their numbers showing a steady increase over the past few years. However, the nature of armed mobilization is changing. Currently emerging groups (which exist alongside longer-standing insurgencies) are no longer large-scale, foreign-supported rebel movements or broad coalitions of rural-based nationalist self-defense groups, even if their commanders often started their military career in these predecessor armed movements. Rather, they represent a multitude of locally rooted and small-scale armed groups, some of which count no more than ten to twenty fighters. The extreme variety of these groups in terms of incentives, social embeddedness, political connectedness, and conduct has produced a particularly fragmented military landscape (Stearns and Vogel 2015). What explains this persistent fragmentation of armed groups after the conclusion of a peace agreement in 2003 and the huge diversity in expressions of military resistance and armed mobilization?

Present-day armed mobilization in eastern Congo is the result of many different factors. In this chapter, we argue that these can be divided into three broad, overlapping categories. The first is local dynamics of conflict and insecurity. A multitude of unresolved conflicts exist around (access to) resources (including land), citizenship, and local authority and identity, which are heavily shaped by the specific features of the Congolese state apparatus and related governance frameworks (Autesserre 2010). Resulting claims are often centered on discourses of “autochthony,” communal rights, self-defense, and protection (Bøås and Dunn 2013). Local conflicts are aggravated by rampant insecurity resulting from foreign or Congolese armed group presence, and the activities of abusive government forces that are deeply distrusted (Vogel 2014; Verweijen 2016a). The second category of factors are militarized power games between elite networks that link local to provincial, national, and regional political actors, and which are influenced by broader political, military, and economic processes, such as electoral dynamics or army restructuring (Stearns 2012a; Stearns, Verweijen, and Eriksson Baaz 2013). A final category of factors contributing to armed mobilization relates to the effects of national and international policies aimed at bringing peace. Certain badly designed strategies to deal with armed groups, including negotiations providing pay-offs, rebel-military integration and ill-coordinated military operations, and the lack of response to drivers of local conflict, have set in motion new claims to power and new protection strategies. These claims and strategies have given a new impetus to armed mobilization or have been an additional incentive to revive or reinforce existing armed structures (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers 2009; Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2013a).

While a ceasefire for armed groups in the provinces of North and South Kivu presented in March 2009 was signed by around 20 armed groups, encompassing the vast majority of then-active factions (Stearns, Verweijen, and Eriksson Baaz 2013), a count held at the end of 2015 identified more than 70 groups in the Kivu provinces alone (Stearns and Vogel 2015), hence excluding the groups operating in other provinces such as Ituri, Haut-Uélé, and Tanganyika. The presence of such a multitude of armed factions has led to a very fragmented politico-military landscape characterized by constantly shifting alliances and cleavages. Yet, the rising number of armed groups seems not to have been accompanied by an increase in the overall number of combatants, although it is difficult to draw conclusions on this due to the lack of reliable estimates. In addition, the success of armed groups seems related not as much to their military capacity or ability to

control territory as to their skills in developing ties to local, national, and regional elites and networks.

The strong local rootedness of these smaller-scale armed groups, and the ongoing conflicts and competition between the civilian networks of which they are a part, have created both the incentives and the possibilities for local authorities and other local elites to draw upon armed actors to reinforce their power position. Consequently, as we argue in this chapter, militarized politics has become accessible to a broadening range of actors. Hence, it has become “democratized” in the sense of drawing in more, but lower-level politico-military entrepreneurs, reflecting how violence as a strategy has become more accessible. This does not mean that armed mobilization is only driven by local dynamics. While there has indeed been a decrease in the involvement of national governments and elites from neighboring countries since 2013, a trend that might well be reversed in the future, national-level politicians continue to play a role in armed mobilization, including via liaising with the lower-level political actors that are currently important allies of armed groups. Furthermore, the practices of these local actors are strongly shaped by national-level policies and events, such as military integration and electoral processes. Therefore, the national domain continues to be a crucial level of analysis for understanding armed mobilization.

Offering an overview of the history of armed mobilization from the precolonial period to the present, this contribution provides the background to an understanding of the post-settlement process of military fragmentation in eastern Congo. The chapter specifically illustrates how after the adoption of a peace accord in 2003, armed groups have continued to proliferate, and how the politico-military landscape has been fragmenting to an extreme degree in recent years. The analysis draws on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, including semi-structured individual and group interviews, focus group discussions, and observations carried out between 1997 and 2016. Interviews were conducted with different categories of informants, including political authorities, civil society organizations, customary chiefs, international observers, representatives of security services, and armed group leaderships and combatants.

Historical Roots: Armed Rebellion from Precolonial Times to the 1960s

Armed rebellion has a long trajectory in eastern Congo. Most armed groups currently operating in the area have their direct origins in the two Congo Wars and the turbulent period leading up to them, or can be considered as a consequence of the failures of the peace process that followed. Present-day armed mobilization, however, also continues to be inspired or shaped by historical imaginaries of armed mobilization, deeply rooted (often ethnically framed) antagonisms, and long-standing conflict dynamics. For instance, during an interview with the vice president of the political branch of the Mayi-Mayi Yakotumba, a Bembe armed group operating in Fizi (South Kivu), he emphasized that the group places itself in a long tradition of (Bembe) resistance against imperialism, colonialism, and government oppression dating back to the nineteenth century uprising against the Arab slave trade near Baraka (interview, Baraka, March 2011).

Indeed, the emergence of armed rebellion in the region goes back to the period when Arab Swahili traders instituted militias as part of their slave raids, provoking the first forms of armed local resistance. More important, however, were the different forms of resistance against brutal and extractive colonial policies, including forced labor and heavy taxation. Customary chiefs, who had a rather ambiguous position toward the colonial rulers, played an important role in this resistance. While chiefs’ integration into the territorial and bureaucratic organization of the colony confirmed their political power, some resisted colonial domination. One of these was the *mwami* (chief) Rutaganda in Kabare (South Kivu), who tried to obstruct the growing impact of the colonial administration. This triggered an outbreak of armed resistance in 1902, which would locally become known as the *oku lwa Bene Mwa Koke* (the war against the sons of Mwa Koke). The conflict erupted after a Belgian colonial administrator was killed, which was followed by two years of reprisals. The *mwami* was forced into hiding until a pact was signed, but new tensions erupted soon after (Njangu Canda 1985; Vlassenroot 2013).

Other instances of rural resistance against the colonial order include the Nyabingi revolts in Rutshuru between 1910 and 1930 (Packard 1982), the Kitawala revolt led by Bushiri Lungundu in Walikale in 1944 (Lovens 1974), and the Binji-Binji revolt in Bushi in 1931 (Njangu Canda 1976). Many of these uprisings had a millenarian and strong anticolonial character. For instance, the Binji-Binji insurrection derived its strength from the mobilization of rites, initiations, and the cult of invulnerability, all used to reinforce the promise of liberation from foreign occupation. It was sparked by the colonial authorities' punishment of a local plantation worker, who as a consequence fled the area. When he returned, he was speaking the language of Lyangombe, a magician who had lived in the region in the sixteenth century and taught a religiously inspired ideology centered on equity between people. Once possessed by Lyangombe's spirit, he was called Binji-Binji and announced the invasion of a huge swarm of grasshoppers. He also promised the arrival of new herds of cattle, which would be distributed equally among the peasant population (Njangu Canda 1976).

In the early 1960s, the rather tumultuous conditions of decolonization would eventually trigger large-scale rebellion in several parts of the country, as rival ideologies and clashing political aspirations caused intensified political competition and divisions. In the east, these rebellions would be a turning point in local politics, as they reinforced ethnic affiliation as a key ingredient of political mobilization and armed recruitment. In North Kivu, ethnic antagonisms focused both on political representation and access to land, and eventually led to what would be known as the Kinyarwanda War (1962–1965) (Mathieu and Tsongo 1998; Stearns 2012b). At the origins of this war was the refusal by self-styled “autochthonous” communities to grant immigrant communities of Rwandan origin (Banyarwanda) access to customary power (and thus the right to distribute land). At the same time, it was feared that the demographic majority these immigrants formed together with Kinyarwanda-speaking groups having arrived in precolonial times would easily lead to political power once elections were held. These tensions have their roots in the colonial era, when the *chefferie* (customary chiefdom) of Gishari was created to host Banyarwanda communities and respond to their territorial claims. Yet, in 1957, control over this territory was given back to the Hunde community, who considered themselves indigenous to the area. After independence, exclusion campaigns targeting the Banyarwanda eventually sparked several peaks of overt violence. In 1962, armed Banyarwanda attacked Hunde police stations in Masisi. One year later, all Banyarwanda occupying political positions were replaced by Hunde politicians (Mathieu and Tsongo 1998). The results of the 1965 legislative and provincial elections, which under dubious circumstances had favored Hunde politicians over Banyarwanda candidates, heralded a new episode of violence. Strikingly, the provincial authorities of North Kivu saw this violence as stemming from the leftist rebellions that had started in the west of the country but eventually also gained ground in the east, and accused the Banyarwanda of supporting this revolutionary movement. This assumed link explains why the provincial assembly of North Kivu voted for a resolution in October 1965 that called for the expulsion of all Banyarwanda (Mathieu and Tsongo 1998). Even if the situation would soon calm down, these events further deepened ethnic antagonism and consolidated ethnically defined access to land and political representation as the crucial factors of local political struggle and future armed mobilization.

In the same period, radical nationalist and anti-imperialist insurgent movements that had spread throughout the country eventually also took root in the Kivus, where they instigated the Simba rebellion. The rebellion's success in the east, however, was mostly conditioned by local and regional agendas (Vlassenroot 2013). Prior to the start of the Simba insurgency, local Fuliiru leaders in Uvira (South Kivu) had organized a number of protests against customary chiefs and the provincial government, and called for the modernization of the administration. When they got in touch with nationalist rebel leaderships that had gone into exile, they started training local recruits and initiated a military campaign (Verhaegen 1966). The resulting Simba movement quickly took control over large parts of the Kivus, Maniema, northern Katanga, and Orientale province. References to spiritual beliefs and practices had to compensate for limited military capacity and organization, and to reinforce combatants' discipline and courage. The success of the Simba would be short-lived though, due to both internal fragmentation and effective counterinsurgency by a coalition of the Congolese army and mercenaries that was heavily propped up with foreign military assistance (Gérard-Libois and Verhaegen 1966). In 1966, the movement was decisively

defeated, even if pockets of resistance remained active around Fizi, with Laurent-Désiré Kabila as the key rebel leader, and in the Ruwenzori Mountains (North Kivu).

In the Fizi/Uvira region of South Kivu, the rebellion was riven by interethnic rivalries between its two core communities, the Fuliiru and the Bembe, which undermined its internal cohesion. The Bembe saw the Fuliiru as guided only by their own local agendas, unconcerned with revolutionary ideology; the Fuliiru, on the other hand, considered the Bembe arrogant and expansionist (Vlassenroot 2013). The rebellion also sparked tensions between the Banyamulenge (Congolese Tutsi from Rwandan descent living in South Kivu) and other communities. The military offensive by the government forces, the Armée Nationale Congolaise (ANC), pushed the Simba rebellion into the Hauts Plateaux mountains, where it started raiding cattle and gradually transformed into an ethnomilitary campaign against the Banyamulenge, a cattle-herding community. The Banyamulenge had never felt attracted by the revolutionary discourse of the Simba and saw no other option than to support the ANC (Muzuri 1983). This positioning further complicated local ethnic relations and caused violence to become framed in ethnic terms. In South Kivu, memories of this violence became crucial points of reference in future political competition, as ethnic antagonisms easily translated into political claims (Vlassenroot 2002).

Ethnic Agendas and Political Turmoil in the 1990s

It was not until the announcement of a democratization process by President Mobutu Sese Seko in 1990, however, that armed mobilization would return to the Kivus. This process sparked intense competition between Mobutu's ruling elite and a new class of claimants to political power. In the provinces of Katanga and the Kivus, ethnic antagonisms were skillfully exploited by Mobutu and his allies to weaken local political opponents and compromise the mobilizing capacity of local civil society movements, which had gained high levels of popularity. In North Kivu, contention again centered on the citizenship status of Banyarwanda communities. Since 1981, these communities had formally been excluded from citizenship, yet they continued to claim their rights. In an attempt to bar the Banyarwanda from political power, customary chiefs and political elites mobilized autochthonous populations against them, drawing on existing disputes around land and customary power. In response, the Banyarwanda started to organize themselves in self defense groups (Mamdani 1998). In 1993, hate speeches by local politicians finally triggered large-scale violence by armed groups in Walikale and Masisi (North Kivu), killing and displacing thousands of people. This conflict was but a prelude to further violence, of which Masisi would become one of the epicenters (Mathieu and Tsongo 1999).

Several of the rural self-defense groups that emerged in the early 1990s also started to challenge Mobutu's political order. Examples include the Batiri (Masisi), the Katuku (Walikale-Kalehe), the Ngilima (Beni-Lubero), and the Kasindiens (Rwenzori, in Beni). Most of these groups had direct links with local politicians, authorities, and businesspeople, who mobilized them to support their attempts to reinforce political, customary, or economic power. But they were also a clear symptom of a political system that was near a total collapse. Increasing political fragmentation, economic crisis, and the breakdown of the educational system all explain the popularity of these groups among local youth, who saw them as an opportunity to escape marginalization and exclusion. At the same time, these groups expressed the need to end state extortion and exploitation and could be considered as alternative structures of protection and political and social control based on ethnic affiliation (Vlassenroot and Van Acker 2001). Some of these groups would transform into key military forces during the two Congo Wars, and several of their commanders would also take up a leading role in the post-settlement military and political landscape.

The Two Congo Wars, 1996–2003

The violence in North Kivu in 1993 was soon followed by the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Burundian refugees in South Kivu, and more than one million Rwandan refugees in both Kivu provinces the following year. These refugees were intermingled with thousands of Interahamwe members (a youth militia that had actively participated in the genocide in 1994) and soldiers from

the defeated Rwandan government forces. Their presence in the Kivus further intensified local ethnic polarization and militarization. Based in refugee camps, they regrouped militarily and started to launch cross-border attacks on Rwanda. This was the direct cause for the creation of a regionally supported insurgency, the *Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaïre* (AFDL), which officially launched its first operations, aimed at dismantling the refugee camps, in October 1996 (Lanotte 2003). Led by the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), the armed forces of the new Tutsi-led Rwandan regime that had taken over after the genocide, the AFDL ousted Mobutu from power in less than eight months. Subsequently, old-time Congolese rebel Laurent-Désiré Kabila, who had gradually strengthened his position within the rebel movement, took over the country's presidency. Aside from attracting recruits itself, the AFDL campaign also provoked other armed mobilizations in the Kivus. Particularly, the presence of large numbers of Banyamulenge and Banyarwanda in the AFDL, as well as the military dominance of the Tutsi-led Rwandan government, caused fears among self-styled autochthonous populations. This explains why some rural-based armed groups, which were increasingly called "Mayi-Mayi" groups, had a rather ambiguous position toward the AFDL. One example is the group led by Padiri Bulenda, which operated in the Bunyakiri area (South Kivu). While providing support to the struggle against Mobutu, part of the group's combatants remained in their area of origin, refusing to follow the AFDL campaign toward Kinshasa. Driven by a patriotic sentiment to fight against the presence of Rwandan forces on Congolese territory, these combatants would eventually turn against Kabila's force. Being deeply embedded into local histories, networks, and conflicts, however, they were not able to transcend local agendas or build up strong military capacity (Hoffmann 2015).

This would drastically change after the start of the Second Congo War in August 1998. A military campaign launched by the Rwanda and Uganda-backed *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie* (RCD) against President Laurent-Désiré Kabila was the trigger for the creation of new armed groups and the further expansion of existing ones. The RCD was very successful in establishing control over strategic areas such as urban centers and mining sites, yet would quickly be prone to internal divisions and fragmentation. Out of patriotic sentiment and in reaction to a number of massacres committed by the RCD, rural armed groups started challenging RCD positions. Some of these groups were rather successful and eventually started to receive various forms of support from the Kinshasa government and foreign armed groups. An example is the group led by Padiri, which was the backbone of an umbrella force of different Mayi-Mayi groups and became one of the key military actors in South Kivu. Like many other groups, it joined forces with a Rwandan Hutu rebel group consisting of the former Rwandan government forces and allied Interahamwe militias that had arrived in 1994, which was the forerunner of the current *Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda* (FDLR). Other Mayi-Mayi groups also started to develop ties to local strongmen, business elites, and political leaders, who tried to incorporate them into their own networks, causing these groups to become deeply entrenched in local and regional war economies (Stearns, Verweijen, and Eriksson Baaz 2013).

These commercial and supra-local linkages explain why certain armed groups, like that of Padiri and to a lesser extent Dunia (based in Fizi, South Kivu), gradually evolved into better-structured armed movements. Moreover, these ties explain why these groups got increasingly detached from their original popular support bases, which were no longer crucial to their survival. To consolidate their local power, certain armed group commanders established parallel *administrations de brousse* (bush administrations) aimed at reinforcing their control over territories and populations (Hoffmann and Vlassenroot 2014). Perhaps the most successful in this respect was again Padiri's group, which had clear ambitions to govern and referred to symbols of statehood to claim local legitimacy (Hoffmann 2015). The group mixed demands for local self-rule with a discourse of the defense of the nation-state against foreign aggression. The governance structure it imposed upon local society echoed the administrative model of the Congolese state and heavily relied on customary authorities, who were charged with the collection of *effort de guerre* (war effort) contributions and the provision of civilian justice (Hoffmann 2015). As it proved difficult to gather the necessary resources and effectively control administrative structures, Padiri's members were increasingly forced to fend for themselves, leading to acts of coercion, extortion, and abuses against citizens that undermined the group's legitimacy. As was the case for many other armed

groups, these dynamics explain why Padiri's Mayi-Mayi increasingly turned against the population they claimed to protect (Hoffmann and Vlassenroot 2014). The same dynamics also illustrate how during the Second Congo War, eastern Congo gradually evolved into a patchwork of rebel fiefdoms that experimented with notions of statehood and got deeply entrenched in local and regional power struggles and war economies. These features would hamper the internationally promoted peace process that gained speed at the start of the 2000s, and which would culminate in the adoption of the Global and All-Inclusive Agreement in 2003.

From Conflict to Peace? A Volatile Transition, 2003–2006

The adoption of the final peace accord introduced a three-year-long transition process that had to enable the successful demobilization of armed groups, the reunification of the country, the creation of a new national army (called *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo*, FARDC) based on a merger of the ex-belligerent forces, and the institution of a new and democratic governance framework. This transition process, however, had limited effect on existing conditions in rural areas and even fostered new armed mobilization, as it opened space for local dynamics of competition and contestation that became linked to larger political and military processes. This would lead to a self-enforcing cycle of mobilization and military fragmentation.

Three factors explain the paradoxical effects of the peace process; first, its reliance on political and military power-sharing as a strategy to accommodate former belligerents and the ways power-sharing was managed; second, the introduction of electoral democracy; and third, misguided policies by the international community, which failed to address the drivers of local conflicts and armed mobilization. The emphasis on power-sharing as a strategy to accommodate (former) belligerents led to constant negotiations aimed at integrating factions into the armed forces and the politico-administrative apparatus. As the factions with the biggest capacity to inflict violence obtained the most important positions, incentives were created for groups to retain or rebuild military capacity (Tull and Mehler 2005). Furthermore, since army integration was an open-ended process, commanders who were disappointed with the first wave of integration sometimes returned to the bush in the hope of negotiating better ranks and positions in subsequent rounds. This applied especially to Mayi-Mayi groups, who lacked the bargaining power, internal cohesion, and access to Kinshasa-based patronage networks necessary to obtain influential and lucrative positions in the newly created security services. Consequently, many integrated Mayi-Mayi combatants ended up in a marginal position, without much prospect to enter a successful military career (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2013a). The few Mayi-Mayi commanders who did get access to influential positions, such as General Padiri, were increasingly driven by self-interest and ignored the demands of their former comrades, who often saw no better option than to return to the bush. Other Mayi-Mayi commanders, such as Zaboloni in Uvira, preferred not to leave their constituencies and kept their military structures in place. Not only did they believe that integration into the national army would cut them off from their local economic and social networks, they also feared for the security of their communities due to unresolved local grievances, deepened ethnic cleavages, ongoing power struggles, and security vacuums as a result of the weak performance of the new security services (Hoffmann and Vlassenroot 2014; Verweijen 2015b).

Another factor that caused the transitional process to have detrimental side effects was the prospect of elections, which triggered new political competition at the local and national level. Some politicians relied on ethnic discourse to mobilize voters and strengthened links with armed groups, many of which were equally mobilized along ethnic lines. Others anticipated the loss of power after the elections and believed that resorting to armed force was a viable alternative means to cling to power. For the RCD, which was very unpopular in the areas it controlled, elections only announced its future political marginalization. Particularly Tutsi communities, which had been key supporters of the RCD, feared a total loss of power and increasingly worried about their own security, having little trust that the Congolese security services would protect them. The ongoing presence of the Rwandan Hutu force FDLR, although having no explicit agenda to attack Congolese Tutsi, as well as that of nationalistic Mayi-Mayi groups, who continued to reject the Tutsi's citizenship claims, only strengthened these security fears (Stearns 2012a).

While international actors, including the UN peacekeeping mission in the DR Congo, played an important role in keeping the transition process on track, they mainly contributed to maintaining the momentum of formal policy and political processes unfolding in Kinshasa, in particular the organization of the general elections, which eventually took place in 2006. International actors had much less grip on informal political dynamics and military developments in the east, and could not pressure armed factions refusing army integration to revise their strategies (Willame 2007). Furthermore, international policies were strongly oriented toward national and regional diplomatic and political developments. Only limited attention was paid to local conflict dynamics, leaving many drivers of armed mobilization largely unaddressed (Autesserre 2010). For the same reason, efforts to demobilize former combatants and reintegrate them into civilian society were not very successful. Faced with marginalization and social exclusion, demobilized combatants became an easy target of future mobilization efforts (Willems and Rouw 2010).

Post-transitional Trouble, 2006–2008

The 2006 general elections, culminating in the electoral victory of incumbent president Joseph Kabila, heralded a formal end to the transition period and entrenched the hold of a now democratically elected president and his patronage network over the national institutions. As this confirmation of Kabila's power limited the prospects for substantial changes in the national level balance of powers, several of the factions that had already been discontent with the transitional process continued to refuse to integrate their troops into the national army. Some even saw reason to formally constitute themselves as antigovernment armed groups. A clear example was the *Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple* (CNDP) created by a dissident Tutsi-led faction of the RCD that had withdrawn itself in its stronghold in North Kivu during the transition. Under the leadership of Laurent Nkunda, who had refused to take up his position as a general in the newly created armed forces (FARDC), the CNDP rapidly grew to be one of the most powerful and militarily capable insurgent forces in eastern Congo. Attracting support from regional networks that encompassed Rwandan government actors, the group soon turned into a serious security threat to Kinshasa (Stearns 2012a). Yet, the CNDP was by no means a mere puppet of Rwanda. It had a broad support base among Tutsi and to a lesser extent Hutu elites who had risen to prominence during the Congo Wars, and who feared losing their privileges in the post-settlement political order.

In other parts of the Kivus, it was mostly former Mayi-Mayi officers who created new armed groups. For instance, in January 2007, Williams Amuri Yakotumba, a former battalion commander in Dunia's Mayi-Mayi forces, officially withdrew from the army integration process and established himself on the Ubwari peninsula, where he created the Bembe-dominated *Mai-Mai Reformé* (Reformed Mayi-Mayi). As he explains:

I believed that going into the integration would constitute betrayal. I had already seen how we were forced to accept the constitutional referendum [organized in 2005] without any explanation given to the population. This kingdom [i.e., Kabila regime] is founded upon lies, so it will end up collapsing (*Voilà ce royaume, c'est fondé sur des mensonges, alors ça finit par s'écouler*). (interview, December 2011)

Aside from discontent with the Kabila government, long-standing tensions between the Bembe and the Banyamulenge, which had already triggered violence during the Simba rebellion in the 1960s, also played a role in this remobilization effort. Additionally, remobilization was promoted by more self-interested motives among Bembe political, military, and economic elites, including General Dunia Lengwama, who strongly supported the creation of the Mai-Mai Reformé (Verweijen 2015b).

But even the ex-belligerents who did agree to dismantle their military structures and integrate their troops into the FARDC did not always entirely give up militarized power politics. Many of them tried to maintain spheres of influence within the armed forces, causing some of the integrated rebel networks to become parallel power structures in the FARDC. A good example are the Banyamulenge troops of General Pacifique Masunzu, who remained in his stronghold on the

Hauts Plateaux as a separate brigade of the FARDC, but remained de facto under his exclusive command. The result was the emergence of a “semi-integrated” or “halfbrewed” military, in which several unintegrated units and separate spheres of influence coexisted with the integrated command and brigades. These convoluted power structures weakened central command and control and unleashed profound centrifugal tendencies in the military (Verweijen 2014).

Such tendencies were further reinforced by the close embedding of these parallel power factions in wider political-economic networks. Many of the former belligerents that had integrated into the FARDC were not redeployed to other areas of Congo, but stayed in or close to their former zones of influence. This allowed them to maintain contacts with politicians, administrators, and businesspeople from their own networks, which were often formed along the lines of ex-rebel groups and/or ethno-regional affiliations. In many cases, these networks also encompassed nonintegrated remnants of the ex-belligerents’ former military structures, which had sometimes formed new armed groups, thus blurring the boundaries between the military and armed groups (Verweijen 2014).

Close ties to extra-military networks, which were underpinned by military actors’ involvement in revenue generation, weakened the FARDC’s operational capacities, which in turn reduced military pressure on armed groups. Moreover, discovering that the divided and ill resourced armed forces were unreliable in battle, Kinshasa authorized the use of armed groups as proxies and allies in the fight against other armed groups (Stearns, Verweijen, and Eriksson Baaz 2013). The existence of parallel networks also fueled strong internal power competition in the military, which was sometimes framed in ethnic terms. Such competition, and resulting divided loyalties, undermined the population’s trust in the neutrality of the armed forces. Politico-military entrepreneurs handily exploited this distrust by presenting it as evidence for the ongoing need for communal self-defense, in this way garnering support for locally embedded armed groups (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2013a).

The operational weaknesses of the FARDC pushed the government toward a path of continuing negotiations, including with its strongest opponent, the CNDP. After months of heavy fighting, in the course of which the government forces sustained severe losses, Kinshasa decided to convene a large peace conference in Goma, the capital of North Kivu province, in January 2008. In an attempt to dilute the CNDP’s influence, the government tried to artificially inflate the presence of other armed groups. To that end, it encouraged existing armed groups to attend what was called the Amani Conference and supported the creation of new groups or the revival of dormant ones (Stearns, Verweijen, and Eriksson Baaz 2013). Consequently, numerous among the nearly two dozen signatories of the presented cease-fire agreement were defunct or phantom armed groups. One of these was the Mayi-Mayi Mahoro. As its commander, Mahoro Kitay Ngombarufu testifies: “During the war, I served as T3 [operations officer] in the brigade of Nyakiliba, based in Kasika [Mwenga territory]. After the war I went to brassage [army integration] in Luberizi, but I never obtained a function and was only granted the rank of major” (interview, Bijombo, September 2011). So when he heard of the Amani Conference, he decided to launch a new movement called the Mayi-Mayi Mahoro, based near Lwindi. He went to Goma and signed the agreements in 2009. He then “brought 900 elements to Luberizi [for integration], so they said I would become a colonel, but this was never confirmed and I never got a function and remained *dispo* [without function] in Bukavu.” In 2012, when he heard about the creation of a new Fuliiru armed group, the Mayi-Mayi Mushombe, he deserted the army to join this group, stating his only motivation was “to have my rank as colonel full officially recognized and get a good function” (interview, Bijombo, September 2011).

The case of Mahoro clearly illustrates the detrimental effects of the Amani Conference. By receiving cash, national and international attention, and the promises of ranks and positions in the military and the politico-administrative apparatus, armed groups were given the impression that “rebel enterprising” pays. This set an example for others aspiring to social mobility, status, and political-economic influence (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers 2009). For this reason, the Amani Conference and associated peace process can be considered a milestone in the post-settlement process of armed group proliferation.

Shaking Up the Political-Military Landscape, 2009–2010

Aside from stimulating, rather than stemming, armed group proliferation, the Amani Conference failed to achieve its primary goal: pacifying the CNDP. In the course of 2008, fighting resumed, and toward the end of the year, Nkunda threatened to capture the strategic city of Goma. Once again, Kinshasa opted for negotiations, this time opening a direct channel with Kigali, the CNDP's major backer. In a rather surprising turn of events, a secret deal was negotiated that stipulated the integration of the CNDP into the Congolese armed forces. At the same time, Kivus-wide military operations were launched against primarily the FDLR, named Kimia II. The deal was eventually sealed by a peace accord signed on March 23, 2009. To manage the military operations, a parallel military structure was created in the Kivus, where the former CNDP held crucial command positions. This allowed the group to reconstitute itself as a parallel power network from within the FARDC. Through the operations against the FDLR, the ex-CNDP also managed to take control over numerous economically strategic areas, including mining sites in Walikale and Nyabibwe (Stearns 2012a).

Not surprisingly, this power shift created major tensions within the army, which reinforced the ties between discontent army factions and nonstate armed forces. It also enkindled wider conflict dynamics in the Kivus. Not only did populations often distrust FARDC units with a majority of Banyarwanda troops, ill conduct of these units produced increased levels of insecurity. Furthermore, these units often threatened the power position of local elites, especially where the latter were linked to armed groups targeted by the military operations (International Crisis Group 2010). Due to the Banyarwanda domination of the newly deployed units, the resulting power struggles and tensions were often framed in discourses of autochthony, thereby reactivating deeply rooted conflict narratives (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2013a).

The Kimia II operations were indicative of a shift in government policy toward armed groups, which now became more strongly focused on military operations. The effects of these operations on armed mobilization, however, were ambivalent. On the one hand, they contributed to weakening the FDLR and other groups, by dislodging them from their main revenue bases and forcing them to withdraw into isolated zones. On the other hand, they led to rampant insecurity, and created new space of movement for smaller armed groups, in part as the FARDC did not manage to effectively occupy and secure the zones formerly controlled by the targeted groups. Having sustained limited losses, the FDLR continued to operate from the fringes of its former strongholds, launching attacks to punish alleged defectors and compensate for lost sources of income. To stem this insecurity and compensate for the weaknesses of the FARDC, numerous self-defense groups sprang up or were reinforced. In this way, the Kimia II operations provided a major new impetus to the process of armed group proliferation (Verweijen 2016b).

Regimentation and Elections: Ongoing Fragmentation, 2011–2012

In 2011, the attention of both international actors and the government shifted largely from the ongoing conflicts and violence in the east to the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections. At the start of the year, a major military restructuring effort was launched that was in part designed to weaken the CNDP's grip over the FARDC in the Kivus. Furthermore, it had to undo some of the administrative and organizational mess created by the rapid military integration process of 2009. As the restructuring exercise entailed the mixing and training of all combatants, existing FARDC units were withdrawn from the field, leaving vast zones of the Kivus unprotected (UN Security Council 2011). Armed groups, including the FDLR, benefited from these security vacuums, which allowed them to extend their areas of operation and control.

One of the areas where the effects of the army restructuring process were particularly visible was Shabunda territory in South Kivu. Here, growing insecurity fostered the transformation and spread of an armed movement named Raia Mutomboki ("the population is angry" in Swahili). Exposed to growing insecurity due to the FARDC's failure to protect the population against the FDLR, citizens in Shabunda started to organize themselves in self-defense groups. The resulting armed movement was very successful in dispelling the FDLR, sometimes with gruesome atrocities, and

forced it to largely withdraw into the impenetrable Itombwe Forest or further north.

The Raia Mutomboki's initial successes caused the movement to rapidly spread to other parts of Shabunda and South Kivu, where it was equally successful in dislodging the FDLR and received massive popular support. As the movement gradually connected to local power structures and dynamics, it turned into an attractive alternative for demobilized ex-combatants and deserted army elements. As a consequence, the Raia Mutomboki became increasingly heterogeneous and eventually fell apart into a multitude of quasi-autonomous subgroups that each controlled separate territories. These subgroups often became deeply entrenched in local political struggles and started to get involved in a wide range of governmental practices including dispute processing, policing, and taxation. This led to the further militarization of local governance and increased levels of abuse against those civilians the group pretended to protect (Hoffmann and Vlassenroot 2014).

While strongly locally rooted, armed groups like the Raia Mutomboki were also attractive to political actors operating at the national level. This became very clear during the 2011 electoral period. In order to reinforce their popularity, be able to campaign in areas controlled by armed groups, and manipulate the voter registration or voting process, numerous candidates made donations to and instrumentalized armed groups (UN Security Council 2011). Others held inflammatory speeches to fuel intercommunity tensions as a means to draw votes, thereby reinforcing the armed groups that employed similar discourses to justify their violent actions. Furthermore, in the wake of the elections, certain *candidats malheureux* (unsuccessful candidates) tried to still gain political influence by liaising with armed groups (Stearns, Verweijen, and Eriksson Baaz 2013). Few of these efforts were successful, indicating that armed group mobilization as a means to directly access positions within the state apparatus at the national level had become decreasingly effective. Even if national leaderships remain key sources of support, armed groups no longer have the capacity needed to realize national aspirations.

The M23 Crisis and Its Aftermath: The Democratization of Militarized Politics

The decreasing effectiveness of armed rebellion as a means to obtain national-level political and military positions is well illustrated by the M23 episode in 2012–2013. While the M23 rebellion shifted the center of gravity of the drivers of armed mobilization once more to the national and regional levels, this turned out to be only a temporary development. The M23 crisis was sparked by efforts by Kinshasa to dilute the power of ex-CNDP networks in the FARDC, in particular by having them redeploy out of the Kivus. In response, a part of the group mutinied, deserted, and eventually formed a new rebellion, the M23, referring to the accords signed between the Congolese government and the CNDP on March 23, 2009, which the group claimed had been violated. With substantial Rwandan support, the M23 rapidly transformed into a serious military threat (Stearns 2012a). In November 2012, the group managed to capture the city of Goma, a major humiliation both for the Congolese government and the UN peacekeeping mission, at the time the single largest of such missions with the strength of around 20,000 uniformed personnel.

But the tables would soon turn. In November 2013, the M23 was militarily defeated, due to a combination of withering Rwandan support (partly as a consequence of international pressure), a new peace-enforcement integrated brigade deployed under the UN flag, and reinvigorated FARDC action (Stearns 2013). Strikingly, the defeat of the M23 would not significantly reduce armed group mobilization in the east. By contrast, in the course of 2014, the number of armed groups further increased, a trend also observed in 2015 and 2016. These developments evoke the question whether this is a decisive shift in the nature of armed mobilization in eastern Congo or a more temporary phenomenon.

A change in strategy toward armed groups of the Kinshasa government from 2013 onward has caused a shift in the incentive structures underlying armed mobilization. The end of a long preferred policy of the wholesale integration of rebel forces into the army and its replacement by more firm military operations has drastically reduced the chances of getting access to high-level military and political positions through the manipulation of armed rebellion. In addition,

initiatives for negotiations by Kinshasa have diminished, which reduces the possibilities for those harboring political ambitions to catapult themselves on the political scene by means of harnessing rebellion. Yet, manipulating armed structures has become a strategy increasingly mobilized by lower-level and second-tier political actors, such as customary chiefs, medium-size businesses, and mid-level commanders. Consequently, a broadening range of actors is reaping the—albeit overall smaller—fruits of militarized politics, amounting to a type of “democratization” of this political logic and practice (Verweijen 2016b).

This development has reinforced the involvement of armed groups in local conflicts of various kinds, including succession conflicts between customary chiefs, and disputes around land, plots, unpaid debts, and access to natural resources. On the one hand, local political figures often solicit such involvement themselves, in the hope of reinforcing their position vis-à-vis their competitors. On the other hand, armed groups impose themselves on conflicts and further inflate them in order to exercise authority and mobilize support. This double-faced nature of armed group involvement reflects the ambiguous insertion of these groups in local sociopolitical orders, hovering between coercion and persuasion (Verweijen 2016a).

While armed groups are strongly shaped by and shape these local orders, this does not imply we should consider them as purely local phenomena. First, national- and provincial-level political actors continue to support and manipulate armed groups. This is for instance illustrated by the *Force de Résistance Patriotique de l'Ituri* (FRPI) in Ituri, the *Alliance des Patriotes pour un Congo Libre et Souverain* (APCLS) in Masisi, and some Raia Mutomboki factions in Kalehe, which continue to receive support from members of national or provincial parliament in order to safeguard their interests both at a local and national level (Vlassenroot, Mudinga, and Hoffmann 2016). Second, the national security forces, clearly shaped by national-level policies, remain a crucial factor in the dynamics of conflict and violence. For instance, the presence of a Banyamulenge-dominated army regiment in the Ruzizi Plain was a key factor in the escalation of tensions and the formation of new Fuliiru armed groups (Verweijen 2016a). Third, many armed groups remain inscribed in wider regional networks and economies. Especially armed groups located in border regions continue to derive important income from transborder commercial networks, sometimes also having networks of supporters among diaspora and refugee populations. A good example is the Mayi-Mayi Yakotumba, which have important networks in Tanzania and Burundi and is engaged in crossborder traffic over Lake Tanganyika (UN Security Council 2011). Fourth, no matter how small, many armed groups and their combatants continue to be inspired by discontent with the current sociopolitical order and government. For instance, in a declaration made in June 2016, the recently created tiny armed group *Conseil National pour la Libération–Force d’Autodéfense Populaire* (CNL-FAP), states: “The constitution is the backbone, the brain of the state . . . but remains ignored and rejected by [our] rulers. Far from democracy, dictatorship reigns meaning bad governance.” The declaration ends with a list of recommendations, including “to respect the constitution of the country, to allow for the holding and organization of presidential elections at the foreseen time” (CNL-FAP 2016). The reference to the current paralyzed electoral process is clear, indicating that present-day armed groups continue to comment on, and be influenced by, national political developments (Verweijen 2016b).

Conclusion

To many observers, armed mobilization in eastern DR Congo constitutes a conundrum. It is driven by and drives multidimensional and multi-scalar dynamics of conflict and violence that not only differ per geographical subarea, but also fluctuate over time. This chapter has attempted to unravel some of this complexity, tracing trends in the evolution of armed mobilization over time. It has described three overlapping and interacting categories of factors driving armed mobilization in eastern Congo: local dynamics of conflict and insecurity, militarized power competition at various levels, and counterproductive policies aimed at addressing armed groups. Furthermore, we have shown how in the shifting interplay of local, national, and regional dynamics, the local level seems to dominate in the current phase of hyper-fragmentation, yet without being disconnected from supra-local levels. Mimicking elites operating at the national and regional level, second-tier

political and military actors now also draw upon armed groups to consolidate their power position, albeit predominantly in local sociopolitical orders. This contributes to a dynamic that can best be labeled a “democratization of militarized politics.”

The democratization of militarized politics has a profound impact on local governance and the dynamics of conflict and security. It promotes the militarization of economic regulation and dispute processing, which aggravates conflicts and renders them more easily violent. Additionally, conditions of insecurity reinforce the position of politico-military entrepreneurs, as people increasingly solicit these entrepreneurs to provide protection. The democratization of militarized politics thus seems to have set in motion a self-enforcing dynamic of militarization. Not only does a rising number of local conflicts feed into the mobilization of smaller armed groups, the presence of these groups in turn leads to a further militarization of local politics and conflicts, thereby blocking the peaceful transformation of conflict dynamics (Verweijen 2016b).

Militarization is likely to continue to imprint Congo’s future political-military landscape. Crucially, in the absence of new hegemonic insurgencies or strengthened security services, it will continue to foster ongoing military fragmentation. Hence, it appears that the current process of military fragmentation has introduced a certain path-dependency that entrenches the interplay between local conflicts and the proliferation of smaller-scale armed groups. However, it is by no means a foregone conclusion that local dynamics will remain key drivers of armed mobilization in the coming years. The configuration of factors at the origins of armed mobilization in eastern Congo seems to appear in a cyclical fashion, reflecting conjunctures in regional geopolitics, the stability of neighboring countries, and national-level political processes. These factors shape whether neighboring countries support rebel groups in Congo, to what extent Kinshasa invests in operationally effective and well-behaving national armed forces, and what the national political stakes of rebellion may be. Because the cycles in which these configurations reappear are erratic, crystal-balling the evolution of the armed group landscape in eastern Congo appears a futile exercise.

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