

Daniel Künzler  
University of Fribourg, Switzerland

## COLONIALISM, NOMINAL SOCIALISM AND SOCIAL POLICIES WITH A FOCUS ON CIVIL SERVANTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF CONGO

### Abstract

This article, through an historical case study, addresses the forces driving social policies in the Republic of Congo. During the colonial period, formal sector employment was mainly limited to the colonial administration but was, nevertheless, comparatively large because many civil servants from French Equatorial Africa worked in the French Congo. They benefited from social policies such as family allowances, introduced earlier and set higher than in the rest of the federation. After Congo's formal independence in 1960, the civil service benefited from regular wage increases and a separate pension scheme. The civil service was expanded disproportionately and became a pillar of power for the nominally socialist regime that took power in 1963. Initially, this could be financed by an oil bonanza, but during the 1980s and 1990s there was international pressure to reduce the civil servant payroll. The Labour Party government was better able to muddle through than the first multiparty government. Returning to power in 1997 after two periods of civil war, the post-social-

ist Labour Party did little to extend social policies to the population outside of the civil service. Health care fee exemptions were announced, but the law creating a universal health insurance fund in 2015 has not yet come into force, and the intended expansion of the Lisungi Cash Transfer Programme failed. Retired civil servants are clearly, still, a main focus of the rather limited policies. Frequent mentions in presidential speeches of salary catch-up and payment of pension arrears and their regular payment signals a continued willingness to support this critical group. This strategic preference, neither pro-poor nor progressive in any way, challenges the dominant focus on social policies in sub-Saharan Africa as donor-driven and concentrated on the informal sector.

**Keywords:** Republic of Congo, social security, pension, civil service

### 1. INTRODUCTION

It is quite widely known that the collection of wild rubber and ivory in the concessions granted by the Belgian

king in his personal property cynically called the Congo Free State was based on widespread atrocities. They were revealed to an international audience as early as 1890 by an African-American historian and journalist who highlighted, among other issues, the fact that there “were no schools and no hospitals except for a few sheds ‘not fit to be occupied by a horse’” (Hochschild 2006, p. 110). The visual proofs provided by a British activist helped build up considerable international pressure, but it was mainly for economic reasons that in 1908 the area became a Belgian colony.

The Belgian model of concession companies was copied by the French in what later became French Equatorial Africa (AEF), containing today’s Republic of Congo. In 1899, the French granted vast concessions to 40 companies, covering roughly three quarters of the territory (Thompson & Adloff 1960, p. 13). There were also atrocities in AEF that made it briefly into the French news in 1905. The idea of an administrative investigation emerged and was quickly implemented to avoid an international commission. The French commission was presided over by Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, an explorer and former governor-general of the French Congo<sup>1</sup> who was against the concession system. His official report denounced the taking of women and children as hostages to increase the collection of rubber. However, it was hushed up and remained

inaccessible for many years, despite pressure from French members of parliament. Brazza died soon afterwards, but his companion Challaye published extracts that shifted public opinion in France. However, as in the Belgian case, it was the economic failure of many concession companies that made France take over most of the concession areas. Some companies were given land and continued to operate with a focus on other raw materials but reports of abuses continued until World War II. The colonial government was similarly abusive and recruited around 200,000 Africans, mainly by force, between 1921 and 1934, to construct the Congo-Océan railway under miserable conditions that, according to official reports, killed between 15,000 and 23,000 Africans and quite likely many more. Based on a relatively broad understanding of social policy, which encompasses the way in which people’s need for food, health, shelter and protection in old age are met, it can be said that the French Congo did not get off to a promising start from a social policy perspective. What happened afterwards is quite a research gap in the English social policy literature. This is certainly also the case for the surrounding francophone and particularly iberophone countries making up what the UN considers the Middle Africa sub-region Middle Africa of Angola, Cameroon, CAR, Chad, Congo, DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and São Tomé e Príncipe. In contrast to the other countries in this region, the colonial past of the French Congo is however not

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<sup>1</sup> The territory had different colonial names and borders, but is called French Congo throughout to keep things simple.

characterized by concession companies but rather by the fact that it was the administrative centre of AEF. This makes the French Congo a unique case.

This paper seeks to explore how social policy evolved after this initial phase and what its driving forces were. After independence in 1960 and a brief period of multi-party democracy, in 1963 the country became a single-party state that later adopted nominal socialism. A number of failed and successful coups did not change this orientation, which only ended with multi-party elections in 1992. This competitive multi-party period did not last long, however, and after two civil wars, former president Sassou N'Guesso and his Labour Party took back power in 1997 and consolidated an autocratic regime financed by oil money. The next section discusses the literature on colonial social policies and their legacies, nominally socialist social policies and social policies in authoritarian political systems before presenting the methodological approach. It is followed by sections focusing on key social policies in the colonial, nominally socialist and post-socialist periods, and a conclusion.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND EMPIRICAL STRATEGY**

### **2.1 Colonial legacies and path dependency**

There is a growing literature on colonial social policies and their legacy in sub-Saharan Africa. One strand of the literature relevant to the Congo assumes

that colonial powers exported their social policy preferences to their colonies and that these preferences are persistent. The Poor Law tradition of Great Britain led to a strong focus on tax-financed social assistance programmes in the former British colonies (Schmitt 2020). By contrast, France had a stronger focus on contribution-financed social insurance according to risk and occupational group. This corporatist focus led to a decreased likelihood of introducing tax-financed cash transfers such as social pensions or child grants (see also Leisering and Weible 2019). Schmitt (2020, p. 146) names family allowances as the only exception to the French lack of social assistance. However, this ascribed French focus on insurance had clear limits and did not include health care or unemployment insurance.

According to Schmitt (2015), family allowances have only been introduced to a significant extent in former French colonies. They were predated by work injury programmes and followed by sickness programmes, all introduced within a fairly short time frame. By contrast, British colonies also started with work injury programmes, but then focused on retirement schemes instead. However, this does not mean that there were no retirement schemes in French colonies. The database Schmitt uses does not include the old-age pension schemes for civil servants that were first introduced for a small group of European staff and then gradually extended to Africans.

Family allowances, work injury and sickness benefits also helped tackle the French concern with depopulation and a perceived lack of soldiers and male workers (Pearson 2018). This concern went beyond formal social security schemes as France aimed at supporting population growth with a number of pro-natalist measures. These measures are related to another particularity of French colonialism. The French colonial administration was quite centralist and viewed colonies as extensions of France, regardless of their economic prosperity (Schmitt 2015). The French colonial state claimed an active role in developing social and economic planning and employed a large administrative staff to achieve this (MacLean 2002). Consequently, it provided a broad level of public social services, including mostly free public and secular health clinics (MacLean 2017). These policies continued to be more generalized and of higher quality after independence than in the British colonies. Here, and in the examples mentioned above, a path dependency is assumed. What are the driving forces of post-colonial social policies and the potential actors behind this path dependency? The next sections discuss social policies in socialist and in authoritarian political systems.

## 2.2 Socialism and social policies

The nominally Congo socialist period coincided with a time when very little international literature was written with reference to social policy in sub-Saharan Africa, because the image prevailed that

African states would not pursue social policies anyway. It is therefore appropriate to look briefly at the literature on socialist social policies written for contexts outside sub-Saharan Africa. Eight years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Bob Deacon (1981, p. 44) remarked that there are Marxist critiques of social policies in capitalist societies but not many descriptions of “what social policies might be like in an alternative socialist society”. Deacon emphasised that social policies are the priority of a socialist society. These social policies are controlled by the masses through workers’ councils and area-representative councils. Social welfare is provided by geographic or workplace communities who control nationally provided resources and community mutual aid. It is these communities, as opposed to the family or the state, that form the base of support and care. Given these criteria, it is unsurprising that Deacon (1981, p. 55) did not see “concrete examples of socialist social policy” in his discussion of Russian and Soviet social policies.

By contrast, Dixon and Kim (1992) discuss the social policies provided in Russia and the Soviet as socialist social policies and the first stage towards the development of communist social policies. They have a productivist focus that prefers an increase in production to redistribution. Consequently, socialist welfare is based on distribution according to work and thus occupational rewards, with residual welfare for those unable to work and no support for those able to work but not working. The So-

viet Union thus developed a variant of social insurance.

Hu and Manning discuss this Soviet variant in more detail and describe it as “a comprehensive system covering at once all the major social risks of injury, sickness, and old age, but with the explicit absence of unemployment insurance” (Hu and Manning 2010, p. 126). While they describe the diffusion of this model through Eastern Europe and China, they are silent about socialist African countries and only discuss the diffusion of the German insurance model to what they call developing countries. In this model, a country first introduces insurance against work injury, then old age and/or sickness and finally unemployment benefits. However, the latter two are still lacking in many developing countries.

### **2.3 Authoritarian regimes and post-colonial social policies**

The literature began to discuss post-socialist social policies in Europe in the 1990s, frequently from the perspective of the transition of welfare regimes. Remarkably, this has rarely been the perspective used for post-socialist sub-Saharan African countries. Since the mid-2000s, there has been a growing body of literature on the driving forces of social policies in these countries and others, with a focus on social policies not related to formal employment. This literature rarely concerns francophone countries and generally describes the rise of tax-financed cash transfers, which, as mentioned above, seem to be

more widespread in former British than in former French colonies. Regarding regime type, cash transfers in the form of social pensions are more likely in democratic countries (Schmitt 2020).

Looking at cash transfers more broadly, they are stronger in two clusters at the democratic and authoritarian ends of the continuum, while the gap between these clusters shows a more mixed picture (Leisering & Weible 2019, p. 205). According to Lavers and Hickey (2021), authoritarian regimes such as Ethiopia or Rwanda opted for the institutionalisation of social transfers when mainly domestic pressure led to distributional crises that were perceived as a threat to political survival. While these countries are poor in natural resources, Künzler (2022) points to a cluster of resource-rich authoritarian countries in the UN subregion Middle Africa, which also includes the Congo, where there are no significant institutionalized cash transfers.

Most of the case studies or comparative literature on social policies in authoritarian regimes barely touch on social policies for the formal sector. This is remarkable, given that there are arguments that emphasise their importance. Mares and Carnes (2009), for example, point to the diversity within authoritarian regimes. The internal equilibria of authoritarian regimes may take three distinct forms that account for differences in social policies. The first form, being based on unconstrained coercion, does not spend much on social policies but rather on the repressive apparatus. In

the second form, social policies are restricted to formal sector workers whose loyalty is ensured by high levels of benefits. The Congo fits this form (Künzler 2022), but who exactly the workers are whose loyalty is needed is left open. In the final form, social policies are institutionally highly fragmented and cover a large number of occupational groups.

Compared to other social policies such as free maternal health care, pension programmes have particular advantages for autocrats seeking to secure the support of groups essential for regime survival. Pension programmes can be precisely targeted to such groups because they exclude non-members, but are non-rivalrous to members or, in other words, they are club goods (Knutsen & Rasmussen 2018). In contrast to private goods that can also be targeted to key supporters but are rivalrous, they extend the promise of future support and signal that the autocrat is willing to care for this group in the long-run, thus making the promise more credible. Older supporters can easily monitor whether the autocrat keeps the promise, and a discontinuation of pension payments or a reversal of the pension program are observable signals to younger supporters that the autocrat is no longer credible, highly likely triggering collective action. Again, the question remains: What are the groups essential for regime survival?

## **2.4 Methodological approach**

As mentioned, there are two research questions: How did social poli-

cies evolve and what were their driving forces? These questions imply that the effects of these social policies on people's lives are not under investigation. To answer them, an historical sociological case study is an appropriate research design. Case studies usually investigate a phenomenon using multiple sources, in this case different types of literature. One type of literature is the academic literature on the political system, colonial and post-colonial social policies which was identified through a systematic search of academic databases using a set of search terms in French and English. Following the broad understanding of social policy mentioned earlier, the search terms covered not only forms of social assistance (e.g., cash transfers, health care fee waivers, food aid) and forms of social insurance (e.g., pensions, health care insurance), but also policies such as land policies or agricultural input subsidies. Another type of literature on social policies comes from a rather unusual source, namely collections of speeches and writings of two presidents (Marien Ngouabi and Denis Sassou N'Guesso), hagiographies of them and the party, and books published by and about ministers in post-civil war cabinets (Anatole Collinet Makosso and Émilienne Raoul). The information in these books is not taken at face value as providing accurate accounts of events and the motives behind them, but rather as deliberate and significant choices regarding the kind of information presidents or ministers want to communicate and thus as a significant signal to the

audience. Significantly, this systematic review has revealed that social policy in Congo is essentially limited to social protection policy and, to some extent, to social assistance. This will accordingly be the focus of what follows in the empirical part<sup>2</sup>.

### **3. COLONIAL SOCIAL POLICIES IN THE FRENCH CONGO AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE FOCUS ON CIVIL SERVANTS**

The formal sector employment level in the private sector was comparatively low (Thompson & Adloff 1960). Although there were several decrees regulating recruitment and working conditions including health care services, housing, food rations and compensation for work injuries, these decrees were de facto hardly applied (Engambé 2016). In contrast, the level of employment in the colonial administration was comparatively high as the bulk of AEF's civil servants and related personnel – mainly men – worked in the French Congo and particularly in Brazzaville, which was

the administrative capital of the federation (Thompson & Adloff 1960). Their trade union was the strongest in AEF (Clark & Decalo 2012, p. 96). Personnel accounted for 57.4% of the French Congo's total expenditure in 1954 (Thompson & Adloff 1960, p. 495) and large parts of the budget of the economically weak colony were financed by other colonies within AEF. Because of the country's central status within AEF, education was more expanded than in the other colonies, as was health care (Dianzinga 2009, p. 92). As elsewhere in AEF, mobile health care units were part of the health care system and there was a concern with depopulation.

Civil servants in the colonial administration benefited from family allowances after 1928 (N'Gaka 2011, p. 36). After pressure from trade unions, all workers in formal employment benefited from small family allowances from 1950 (Thompson & Adloff 1960, p. 263; N'Gaka 2011, p. 39). The French Congo thus predated the introduction of family allowances across AEF through the 1952 Labour Code (*Code du Travail*). This overseas Labour Code extended to African workers the family allowances that had already been paid to European workers for eleven years. This somewhat relativizes the top-down application of French law in the colonies, which is sometimes described in the literature. However, the assemblies of the different colonies had to define the amount of the family allowance and its financing, and this led to heated debates that delayed the application of the Code

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<sup>2</sup> All citations from sources in French are translated by the author. The current president's name is written differently (Sassou, Sassou N'Guesso, Sassou-Nguesso, Sassou Nguesso) in both academic and non-academic publication. I noticed this when I started to look at social policies in the Republic of Congo as part of a research project. I followed the notation used by himself (Sassou N'Guesso 1997) and by his daughter (Lemboumba Sassou N'Guesso 2013) who is an official communications consultant for her father.

until 1956 (Thompson & Adloff 1960, p. 263). The employers wanted them to be tax-financed, which the African elite and the colonial government opposed. The family allowance was clearly set much higher in the French Congo than in other colonies in the AEF, and the employers' contribution was set at 65%. There was a small subsidy from the federal budget, and the rest was financed from the colony's budget. This diversity within the AEF nuances the allegedly centralized approach of France described by Schmitt (2020, p. 147). However, the financing of family allowances by a mix of federal, colonial governmental, and mainly employer contributions into a fund (*caisse*) also situates them closer to the insurance logic than she seems to assume. Among the justifications for the family allowances was, again, depopulation (Thomson & Adloff 1960, p. 263).

The Labour Code also included protection against the risk of sickness, but not of accidents which became the subject of a separate law in 1957. Remarkably, the Labour Code did not include pensions. Again, members of the colonial administration in the French Congo had privileges compared to other workers in formal employment. A decree created in 1951 a local pension fund for indigenous staff. In 1956 the local pension fund for AEF was established, catering for civil servants (N'Gaka 2011, p. 38). Workers in the colonial administration, particularly those working in Brazzaville, had a privileged position, not only benefitting from health care services but

also from family allowances and pension schemes. This social insurance focus thus predated the following socialist period but is compatible with socialist social policies. What happened to this social policy after independence?

#### **4. A CONTINUING FOCUS ON CIVIL SERVANTS UNDER NOMINAL SOCIALISM AFTER INDEPENDENCE**

In the face of more radical politicians, the French establishment favoured the rise of the former priest Fulbert Youlou who became prime minister in the late colonial period and subsequently president after formal independence in 1960. Situating Youlou requires a qualification on terms related to ethnicity. On the one hand, it is clear that ethnicity was mainly a colonial construct; on the other hand, such terms are a common part of past and contemporary everyday and political language in the Congo. As a term used in politics, it was and is relevant for the construction of identity and difference. Based on this understanding, terms indicating ethnic and regional affiliation appear in quotation marks. Youlou was a 'Lari', the dominant group around Brazzaville that had an advantage regarding colonial education. The 'Lari' are part of the demographically dominant 'Southerners', as opposed to 'Northerners' such as the 'Mbochi', who dominated the rank and file of the military. It was basically the 'Lari' and non-Congolese that took the positions vacated by the French and those newly created, as the Youlou government

actually expanded the civil service and considerably raised its salaries: “By 1964, Congo’s civil service, less than 1% of the total population, was absorbing about 62% of the national revenue” (Clark & Decalo 2012, p. 96). With independence, the civil servant’s pension scheme was converted into a pension fund of the Republic, and a new pension scheme for formal sector workers covered by the still unchanged Labour Code was introduced in 1962. While this dualism persisted, private formal employment was not very important and the focus in what follows will thus be the civil servant’s pension scheme and salaries refer to civil servants, mainly men.

When Youlou tried to turn the country into a one-party state with only one legal trade union, trade unions revolted in August 1963. Youlou was arrested by the military. The military named ‘Lari’ teacher Alphonse Massamba-Débat interim leader and declared the National Council of the Revolution the only legal political party. At the end of the year, Massamba-Débat was elected president as sole candidate. The following year, the Council was renamed the National Mouvement of the Revolution (MNR), a political mass party with socialism as its official ideology. The party had two currents. Massamba-Débat led the more moderate current and saw the civil service – but not its trade union – as a counterweight against the military (Clark & Decalo 2012, p. 96). MNR militants were appointed to supervise civil servants, and non-nationals were replaced.

Freezing the size of the civil service was difficult as real administrative controls were lacking. No serious attempts were made to cut the cost, “since Massamba-Débat feared the power of the trade unions” (Clark & Decalo 2012, p. 96). The program of the MNR promised jobs for all, fair wages and free education (Obembe 1987), without much in the way of concrete action. The civil service was supposed to become a key pillar of the revolution. In 1966 Massamba-Débat attempted to put the army, dominated by ‘Northerners’, under the control of militant ‘Southerners’, and more radical critics were jailed or, as in the case of captain Marien Ngouabi, a ‘Northerner’, demoted and reassigned (Clark 2008). Ngouabi was reinstated after protests, but he was arrested again in early 1968, triggering a period of political volatility.

In August 1968, power was handed over to a National Council of the Revolution (CNR) presided over by the thirty year old Marien Ngouabi. Among the members were Alfred Raoul and Denis Sassou N’Gouesso, but initially also Massamba-Débat and some of his supporters. After Massamba-Débat resigned, Ngouabi became, at the end of 1968, the official president of the country that became a People’s Republic the following year. However, “Ngouabi’s rise to power had nothing whatsoever to do with a desire to further Marxism, socialism or the Congolese revolution” (Decalo 1985, p. 43). The MNR was replaced by the Labour Party (*Parti congolais du travail* (PCT)), officially a Marxist-Le-

ninist vanguard party (Ngouabi 1975, pp. 47-8). Social policy goals included the implementation of a rigorous social insurance policy, a reasonable housing policy for workers, and the implementation of a full employment policy (Obembe 1987, p. 119). The colonial emphasis on rural health care was retained, but free health care was not, although certain fee exemptions continued to exist (Ngouabi 1975, p. 461).

Under Ngouabi, the civil service continued to grow rapidly, but its composition started to change (Clark & Decalo 2012). With educational facilities more widespread, the pool of candidates became broader, and fellow 'Northerners' and particularly 'Mbochi' became more important in the civil service. However, Ngouabi's relations with the civil service remained ambivalent. He broke up their union, required a party certificate from them and expelled some servants allegedly involved in a coup attempt in March 1970. He reacted to another coup attempt in 1972, again carried out with the participation of civil servants, with a salary increase, having already raised salaries on taking power. Another salary increase especially aimed at the lower ranks was granted in 1974 at the second PCT congress. By then, the number of civil servants had increased sevenfold since 1960. In the early 1970s, the rising price of oil produced off-shore in Congo helped finance this expansion. Salaries accounted for more than half of the country's budget (Decalo 1985, p. 48).

On 18 March 1977, Ngouabi was assassinated. Whether it was a plot of 'Southerners' around former President Massamba-Débat, as the official version claims, a pre-emptive step of 'Northerners' around Denis Sassou N'Guesso fearing a civilian opening to 'Southerners', or a coup orchestrated by France remains unclear. However, a military committee under Joachim Yhombi-Opango took power. He struggled to pay pensions and salaries regularly and withheld parts of the salaries, allegedly for the development of the country (N'Gonika 2009, p. 21). After less than two years in power, Yhombi-Opango was removed, allegedly for corruption and deviation from party directives. However, pointing to ideological differences helped to conceal the intra- 'Mbochi' power struggle that was lost by the subgroup around Ngouabi and Yhombi-Opangi and won by the subgroup of the new leader Denis Sassou N'Guesso (Clark 2008, p. 131).

His official portrayal as a faithful scientific socialist in the Marxist-Leninist tradition contrasts not only with his bourgeois lifestyle but especially with his politics and close ties to French business interests. Regarding the civil service, ambivalence between mistrust and reprimand on the one hand and concern about regular salary payments on the other continued (Clark & Decalo 2012, p. 97). The latter was facilitated with resurgent oil revenues for some years. Another concern was with retired civil servants, and the Central Committee in 1984 convened a commission to

improve the pension system, leading to the creation of a civil servants' pension fund. By the mid-1980s, however, oil revenues had started to decline, and the government struggled to pay the salaries of civil servants whose number had doubled from 1974. When parastatals and the security services are taken into consideration, a quarter of the entire adult workforce was on the government payroll (Clark & Decalo 2012, p. 99). The expanding civil service was also used to incorporate the elites of different regions in the country (Englebert & Ron 2004). University graduates were de facto automatically recruited into the civil service. Public education was massively expanded and highly politicized (Bazenguissa-Ganga 1999). Patronage within the educational system and through recruitment in the civil service stabilized the regime. With the decline in oil prices, the government struggled financially and announced a stop to automatic recruitment, triggering demonstrations. Under pressure from the IMF and World Bank, Sassou N'Guesso announced salary cuts in 1986 and 1988, but applied them only partially (Clark & Decalo 2012).

In 1990, the Trade Union Confederation broke away from the ruling Labour Party and called for a democratic opening, salary increases and a reversal of the freeze on recruitment into the civil service (Yaucat-Guendi 2021, p. 60). It also opposed a plan to lower the retirement age for civil servants from 60 to 55 (Mbouity 2021, p. 60). After strikes and protests, Sassou N'Guesso allowed po-

litical parties, abolished Marxism-Leninism and "in a desperate effort to buy political support" hired several thousand new civil servants (Clark 2008: p. 103-4). Another round of recruitment was meant to recompensate 'Northerners' for the looming handover of power to 'Southerners' (Clark & Decalo 2012, p. 99) that started with the appointment of a transitional Prime Minister by the Sovereign National Conference in 1991.

The country, by then no longer nominally a People's Republic, held presidential elections in August 1992. Sassou N'Guesso polled a distant third. He was able to rally 'Northerners' behind him, but the region is demographically too weak for this to have affected the outcome. In second place, largely thanks to the support of the 'Lari' group, was Bernard Kolélas. The candidate of the demographically dominant and thus victorious 'Grand Niari Southerners' was Pascal Lissouba, who had been prime minister under Massemba-Débat, jailed in 1973 and liberated after Sassou N'Guesso took power. Lissouba briefly ruled in a parliamentary coalition with the Labour Party, but Sassou N'Guesso left the government, which consequently lost its parliamentary majority (Clark 2008; Englebert & Ron 2004). In November 1992, Parliament was dissolved, and political and social contestations followed. Contributing to this was the fact that, under Lissouba, salaries were no longer paid regularly (Clark 2008). To catch up some arrears and appease the civil service before elections, Lissouba sold oil before it was extracted

(Clark & Decalo 2012). The parliamentary election in May 1993 did not calm things down. On the contrary, protests turned into a civil war in Brazzaville in which the three main political camps created militias they hardly controlled (Bazenguissa-Ganga 1999). In January 1994, this first round of fighting ended (Englebert & Ron 2004).

Lissouba started to liberalise the economy and privatize or liquidate some parastatal companies. Some phantom workers were removed from the payroll, as well as allegedly 8,000 workers (Clark & Decalo 2012, pp. 98-9). The devaluation of the Franc of the Financial Community of Africa (FCFA) used in the Congo nominally cut salaries in half. To reduce the payroll further, civil service working hours were reduced in 1995 among other measures (Yaucat-Guendi 2021, pp. 93-4). Nevertheless, salary arrears had accumulated up to thirteen months in 1995, and a two-month strike meant that the government could only pay back wages in part (Clark 2008, p. 104). This situation was a handicap for Lissouba, and another strike broke out on the eve of the elections scheduled for July 1997. The elections never took place, as a second round of civil war concentrated in Brazzaville started, ending with the military victory of former president Sassou N'Guesso in October 1997 (Bazenguissa-Ganga 1999). Fighting resurged in 1998-9 outside Brazzaville but ended when the elites of the other fractions surrendered in return for their old civil service jobs (Englebert & Ron 2004, p.

62). As Sassou N'Guesso controlled the capital Brazzaville and thus access to oil rents, they could not finance a continuous war. All in all, at least 12,000 persons were killed and up to one third of the population of 2.5 million was internally displaced (Englebert & Ron 2004, p. 62). The population depended on emergency aid that was concentrated in Brazzaville. However, when emergency aid came to an end, the support of the international community rapidly diminished.

## **5. THE SOCIAL POLICIES OF THE POST-SOCIALIST LABOUR PARTY REGIME**

While the relative stability of Sassou-Nguesso's revived patronage system was based on the inclusion of elites from other ethnic groups, it was clearly autocratic and reserved key posts for a small group of loyalists sharing the same ethnic identities. The oil sector was controlled by Sassou N'Guesso's family, his son Denis Christel in particular (Public Eye 2017). Civil servants continued to be a key pillar of this system. Just after retaking power in 1997, Sassou N'Guesso pointed to months'-long salary and scholarship arrears and pensions unpaid for three years despite the structural adjustment programs (Sassou N'Guesso 1997). Blaming his predecessor Lissouba, he stressed that this had never been the case since independence and that he would tackle this problem immediately. He called on the international financial institutions to show moderation and weigh a balanced

budget with the fact that many people lived on one civil service wage. A component of his program for the upcoming elections related to social policies that mentioned the regular payment of salaries and pensions, the value of salaries and the family allowance, the end of earlier salary deductions, and the revitalization of the general social security fund and the civil servants' pension fund (Mabanza 2009, p. 191).

In 2002, Sassou N'Guesso won the presidential elections in the absence of any serious rivals and under the thinly veiled threat of a return to civil war. The militia formed by Kolélas did not accept the elections and conflict resumed near Brazzaville for one year. After Sassou N'Guesso's term commenced, his speeches occasionally mentioned health care, and some of the recruitment into the civil service was announced in this sector (Lemboumba Sassou N'Guesso 2013). In his 2006 end of year speech, Sassou N'Guesso announced that, as part of the fight against HIV/AIDs, antiretroviral drugs were to be made available free of charge in 2007, the year of the parliamentary elections. In his State of the Nation Address in October 2007, he announced that malaria treatment would be free of charge for children under the age of five and their mothers in 2008. At the end of 2007, he announced that this exemption would cover children under the age of fifteen years. In addition, he announced free primary education. Finally, in 2010, he announced that all caesarean births and pregnan-

cy-related surgery would also be free of charge.

At the same time, the topic of civil servants' salaries and pensions recurred frequently in his speeches during this term. After pointing to the regular payment of salaries during the year, Sassou N'Guesso, at the end of 2003, promised to tackle the still existing salary arrears and announced a cash infusion into the general social security fund and the civil servants' pension fund (Lemboumba Sassou N'Guesso 2013, p. 63-64), both of them in financial difficulty. Two years later, he again pointed to the regular payment of salaries and announced increases in his end-of-the-year speech. In 2005, there was considerable new recruitment into the civil service, and earlier salary deductions were reversed (N'Gonika 2009, p. 127). However, there were still salary and pension arrears. In early 2006, the year the Labour Party officially adopted a social-democratic ideology (Mbouity 2021, p. 9), there were still 24 months of salary arrears (Clark & Decalo 2012, p. 99). An increase in the lowest salaries in the civil service and civil service pensions was announced at the end of 2006, as well as a rise of the pension age from 55 to 60 years (Lemboumba Sassou N'Guesso 2013, p. 157), a step much more in line with the interests of the workers in the Congo than in other contexts. A reduction of salary arrears was announced for 2007, the year of the parliamentary elections clearly won by the Labour Party and its allies, and for 2008. For 2008, again the reversal of earlier salary

deductions was announced, and salaries allegedly rose. For the electoral year 2009, an increase of 66% in the family allowance was announced, and civil servants were to enjoy a new transportation bonus equivalent to more than two months' minimum wages (Lemboumba Sassou N'Guesso 2013, p. 232).

Sassou N'Guesso's 2009 electoral programme (see Gankama 2009) was comparatively vague on civil servants and their salaries. Nevertheless, he clearly won the election, and in 2012 the Labour Party won a clear majority on its own in a parliament that included one son and one daughter of Sassou N'Guesso. Before the elections, a new law was introduced that fixed retirement ages for public servants at between 57 and 65 years, depending on their position in the administrative hierarchy (Lebela 2019). Another law also introduced before the 2012 elections established a regime providing a number of non-contributory allowances for families and children in difficulties. However, it was not followed by regulations to implement it (Raoul 2020, pp. 83-4). This followed an earlier increase of the family allowance (Makosso 2019, p. 282).

In his 2009 electoral programme, Sassou N'Guesso made the vague comprehensive commitment to "restructure social protection so as to extend it, in its basic aspects, to the entire population" (Raoul 2020, p. 80). This pledge echoed similar earlier statements (Lemboumba Sassou N'Guesso 2013, p. 113). His clear election victory and the country's good financial situation gave him the

possibility to implement this promise. In 2014, as part of the Lisungi Safety Nets System Project, a conditional cash transfer pilot started (Raoul 2020). It was supported by the World Bank and other donors in addition to domestic funds and targeted fewer than 20,000 beneficiaries. Households were expected to exit the program after two years, to school children and to have the elderly medically checked. Political support for an expansion seemed weak in the following years. However, with the additional financial support of the French Development Corporation, the program was geographically expanded from 2018. It was also included in the agreement with the IMF in July 2019. There was an additional loan from the World Bank for a temporary expansion as part of the Covid-19 response in 2020. According to Émilienne Raoul (2020), who was minister for social affairs until 2016,<sup>3</sup> Sassou N'Guesso announced nationwide coverage. This, however, has not yet been reached.

Another policy that stalled was the health insurance announced, for example, in the 2007 State of the Nation speech (Lemboumba Sassou N'Guesso 2013, p. 185). In 2015, a universal health insurance fund was created by a law that has not yet come into force, however (Raoul 2020, p. 106). This law was introduced shortly before the constitution was changed, allowing Sassou N'Guesso a third term as president. This

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<sup>3</sup> She is the wife of CNR-member Alfred Raoul mentioned above.

triggered protests and a renewed round of fighting outside Brazzaville, resulting in 15,000 death and the internal displacement of 100,000 people. In the run-up to the constitutional amendment, Sassou N’Guesso’s State of the Nation speech pointed to the problems civil servants had encountered in the 1990s to emphasise the achievements under his tenure. The lowest salary level was raised in 2015 and again in 2016, the year of the next presidential election. The implementation of the regime for families and children in difficulties and of the universal health insurance fund were among the rare electoral promises related to social policies in 2016 (Yaucat-Guendi 2021, p. 178). However, Sassou N’Guesso clearly won the elections ahead of Guy-Brice Parfait Kolélas, son of Bernard. The Labour Party also clearly won the parliamentary elections in 2017. Power was thus consolidated, and Sassou N’Guesso could afford to clean fictitious public servants from the public sector payroll.

In the following years, there were repeated reports of growing pension payment arrears, which reached 28 months in 2020 according to media reports. At the same time, the number of retired civil servants increased from 26,600 in 2019 to 45,000 in 2021. However, active civil servants were paid regularly. By 2016, their number had increased twentyfold since independence (Lebela 2019, pp. 45-6). Ahead of the 2021 elections, the government announced a loan from a banking pool to resolve the arrears. The electoral program did

not refer much to salaries and pensions, but rather promised the implementation of the universal health insurance fund and the expansion of the Lisungi cash transfer (Yaucat-Guendi 2021). On the eve of the election, the main opposition candidate Kolélas died in connection with Covid-19, and Sassou N’Guesso garnered 89% of the vote. After the election, a sit-in was held in front of the Prime Minister’s office to protest against the pension arrears that by then had reached 33 months. The office was empty, but when Anatole Collinet Makosso later occupied it, resolving this situation was considered an important task of his government, which included one son of Sassou N’Guesso (Mampoussa 2022, p. 127). However, at the end of the year, the president again had to promise that the pension arrears were to be settled as soon as the necessary resources become available. To save money and accommodate the needs of some civil servants, government decided in July 2022 to raise the retirement age for civil servants from 60 to 65 years and even 70 years for some executive civil servants.

## **6. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK**

So how have social policies evolved in the Congo? They have become more diverse in recent years. Health care services for the broader population have been neglected although health care fee exemptions were announced in the early 2000s. However, a law creating a universal health insurance fund and another

law that established allowances for families and children in difficulties in 2012 have not yet been implemented, and the intended expansion of the Lisungi Cash Transfer Programme has stalled. The main focus of social policies remains the salaries and benefits of civil servants and their pensions. Since he retook power in 1997, Sassou N’Guesso’s speeches regularly mention the regular payment of salaries and the catching up of pension payments to former civil servants. While this sometimes happens in the run-up to elections, it also happens at other times. This puts into perspective the large focus on elections in social policy research on sub-Saharan Africa.

What conclusions can we draw from these constant announcements? Not necessarily that civil servants are doing extremely well. According to Makosso (2019, p. 281), the lowest-paid civil servant should, in 2016, have received a basic monthly salary of Euro 182, which does not provide a decent life but is quite high compared to other sectors in the Congo and the civil service in neighbouring countries. In addition, there are family allowances and social protection against sickness, among other benefits (N’Gaka 2011, p. 108), which continues the French colonial tradition. The situation is worse after retirement as civil servants have to wait several years before they are granted a pension (Lebela 2019, p. 44). Automatic admission to the pension scheme was promised for 2008 (Lemboumba Sassou N’Guesso 2013, p. 157) but failed to materialize. Pensions are much lower than salaries

and do not maintain the standard of living. As mentioned, they are paid less regularly than salaries, and considerable arrears have accumulated. Vowing improvement again and again seems like an empty ritual.

However, it is significant and points to the driving force of social policies that current and retired civil servants – and not, say, the poor, farmers or mothers – are a key target group in many speeches and of many social policy measures. Since the colonial period, this group has been essential for those in power.<sup>4</sup> This state of affairs continued after independence, under nominal socialism and, following a period of structural adjustment and two civil wars, under formal social democracy.<sup>5</sup> However, the composition of this group and thus access to the patronage network has changed over time and become regionally more inclusive, but the group is still dominated by men. Salaries and, as mentioned in the theoretical section, pensions, are club goods targeted at this group to secure regime survival. Pensions promise future support for active civil servants; to

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<sup>4</sup> The military is another essential group, but there is much less publicly available information on salaries and pensions and it is not mentioned in the same way in speeches.

<sup>5</sup> In Congo, visual and linguistic borrowings from socialism are remarkably still common. The ruling Labour Party still has a *bureau politique* (politburo) and its logo shows a gold star that is linked with two palm fronds to an overlapping hammer and hoe. This ideological legacy is less visible in the political program and especially in practice.

the same extent, the repeated announcements regarding pension arrears signal the autocratic president's willingness to support pensioners in future. This reduces the incentives for active and retired civil servants to support regime change. The haunting memories of the struggles under the Lissouba regime and during the civil wars further reinforce this.

This leads to the conclusion that the overwhelming focus on social policies targeting the informal sector that informs much of the recent literature on sub-Saharan Africa masks the strategic social policy preferences of the regime in the Congo. These preferences are neither pro-poor nor progressive in any way but must be noted in order to decentre

the social policy literature on sub-Saharan Africa with its focus on donor-driven policies for the informal sector. They also remind us to bring the formal sector back into social policy analysis. While the Congo with its past as administrative centre of AEF may appear to be an extreme case, there is scattered evidence that the social policies of neighbouring countries such as Gabon, Chad or the Central African Republic, also have a striking focus on civil servants (see e.g., Künzler 2022). This needs to be investigated more systematically. It may indicate that this focus has less to do with the colonial or nominally socialist past but is rather a characteristic of resource-rich authoritarian regimes.

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