



Violence of the Name: How Naming the M23 Rebel has perpetuated conflict in the Eastern Congo

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In the Kivu region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a multitude of rebel groups, government forces, U.N. troops, and civilians are currently entangled in a devastating struggle, with death tolls as high as 5 million people since 1996.¹ One rebel group named M23 has recently captured national and international attention for its use of violence in the Kivu region from 2009 until present. Current policy to address M23 and the surrounding conflict minimizes the protracted and volatile history of violence wherein forced disarmaments and peace agreements continue to be asserted and reasserted without thoughtful examination and consequently do little to decrease the violence. Because the M23 movement is not an isolated incident but part of a reemergence of resistance movements over the past several decades, policy approaches must account for the rich context of this group before lasting and just policies can be implemented. Thus, I begin my argument with an overview of the extensive, often overlooked, history of the M23 movement to manifest the cycle of violence perpetuated by the negligence of policymakers to thoroughly examine multiple levels of analysis regarding this complex conflict.

¹ Jason K. Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), 4.

In contextualizing the violence in the Eastern DRC, I show how M23, like many other political and social actors in the region, uses violence as a means to survive amidst what has become an ordinary state of prolonged violence. The extreme, ongoing violence of this area, however, cannot be entirely rationalized by citing a prolonged state of emergency. Using foundational social and political theorists Karl Schmitt and Jacques Derrida, I argue that M23's use of direct violence juxtaposes a more ordinary form of violence embedded in the politics of naming. In assuming that the name fully describes the named, we risk reducing complex movements like M23 to limited definitions of the "rebel group," which rely on a simplified perception of the "rebel" as a savage and illegal actor. Policy approaches that depend on these limited definitions of the "rebel" reduce the M23 movement through unsuccessful disarmament policies and forced peace treaties that fail to recognize the political and social demands that historically form the backbone of M23's *raison d'être*. By examining the M23 movement within the politics of naming, I argue that policymakers can employ more effective policies that take into account the region's complex history and humanize the actors involved by situating them in their context to more adequately address the ongoing violence.

Despite its recent formation in 2009, the M23 movement can trace its roots back through the turbulent history of the colonial and postcolonial DRC. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country rich in land, resources, and people, has experienced brutal exploitation since colonial times, the effects of which are still evident today.² Lasting colonial

² At the turn of the 20th century during the global "Scramble for Africa," the Berlin Conference of 1885 recognized King Leopold II of Belgium as the sovereign leader of the Congo. King Leopold brutally ruled the Congo from 1885 to 1908, heavily exploiting the people and resources for personal gain. His reign was marked by the direct killing, mutilation, and starvation of millions of Congolese, who were forced from their land and coerced to overwork themselves collecting rubber from Congo's rich rainforests. Leopold's Congo also imposed a "coercive state apparatus" of heavy taxing and political repression seeping with racism that considered Africans backwards and uncivilized. In the mid-1900s, an independence movement formed, resulting in a hasty withdrawal of the Belgians and the sloppy installment of Congolese independence on June 30, 1960. Run by ill prepared and untrained Congolese officials, the newly independent state could not contain the army mutiny that occurred just four days after independence. The mutiny deprived

prejudices and poor state structures, combined with influential regional events, ethnic rivalries, and a failing economy, have contributed to over 17 civil wars—ranging from secessions, rebellions, and invasions—from the time of Congo’s independence in 1960 to December 2010, and still counting.³

Contemporary analysis of conflict in the eastern Kivu region often begins in the time of independence, during the dictatorial regime of Mobutu Sese Seko, Congo’s president from 1965-1997. Over his thirty years as president, Mobutu capitalized on ethnic, regional, and political divides so as to maintain control over the vast Congo and exploit the country’s wealth and resources for personal use.⁴ His numerous acts and policies as president brought the country to the brink of economic and political upheaval and sparked ethnic tensions in the east, pushing ethnic identities into the fray of the DRC’s political climate.⁵

the new state of its monopoly of violence and according to Kisangani, “set in motion an environment favorable to perpetuating violence.” The mutiny ended in the assassination of the new president, Patrice Lumumba, and the installment of the 32-year dictator, Joseph Mobutu. Emizet François Kisangani, *Civil Wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 1960-2010* (Boulder: Lynee Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2012), 11-18.

³ Kisangani, *Civil Wars in the DRC*, 1.

⁴ Kisangani, *Civil Wars in the DRC*, 25-29.

⁵ In many analyses of the current conflict in eastern Congo, ethnicity has been brought to the forefront, often as the single cause of much of the violence plaguing the region. While ethnic divides are certainly a factor, these analyses underemphasize the economic and political circumstances that have created such huge rifts between Hutus and Tutsis. Until these ethnic identities were politicized by colonial powers in the early 1900s (and continue to be politicized by political leaders today), Hutus and Tutsis were not so different from each other. In fact, in pre-colonial Rwanda, it was possible for Hutus to become Tutsis, if they acquired enough cows, and for Tutsis to become Hutus, if they became agriculturists. Relative mobility between the identities allowed for nonviolent coexistence that was only disrupted when colonial powers assigned more political power to Tutsis and gave fewer rights to Hutus. The politicization of ethnicity, then, caused Hutu and Tutsi to become divisively fixed entities, which those vying for power sought to exploit. For this reason, and not for differences assumed to be inherently divisive, ethnicity can be said to play a role in the Kivu conflict. Mahmood Mamdani, *When*

The devastating genocide in neighboring Rwanda in summer of 1994, in which nearly one million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed in an explosion of political hatred and ethnic rivalries, hugely exacerbated ethnic tensions in the DRC. As the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) government pushed out the genocidal Hutu extremists and ended the 100-day genocide, an influx of over 1.2 million refugees entered the DRC, predominately made up of Hutu perpetrators who feared RPF retribution, but also including Tutsis continuing to flee from the genocide.⁶ This upset the delicate balance in the Kivu region, where a group of Congolese Hutu and Tutsi called the Banyarwanda had been struggling to maintain autonomy for years despite overwhelming discrimination from other Congolese who felt the Banyarwanda belonged in Rwanda.⁷ The Hutu extremists who organized the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, later called the FDLR (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda), continued their project of eliminating the Tutsis from their refuge across the border in the DRC, involving and implicating the Banyarwanda automatically due to their ethnic similarities.⁸

With over one million Rwandan citizens living in overcrowded refugee camps in the DRC, international support poured in, despite the international community having taken no action during the genocide just weeks earlier. In the camps, however, aid workers made no distinction between perpetrators and non-perpetrators, and the international relief went straight into the hands of Hutu extremists.⁹ This gave them the means to consolidate their control over the Rwandan refugees in the camps, to continue inflicting terror on both the Tutsis in the camp and the residential Banyarwanda Tutsi (called the Banyamulenge) living in the surrounding area, and to begin launching attacks on the new government of Rwanda from their power hub in the Kivus.¹⁰ This set the stage for the First Congo

Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁶ Kisangani, *Civil Wars in the DRC*, 28.

⁷ Jason K. Stearns, et al, “Banyamulenge: Insurgency and Exclusion in the Mountains of South Kivu,” Rift Valley Institute: Usalama Project, 2013, pp. 19.

⁸ Stearns, “Banyamulenge,” 19.

⁹ Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters*, 38-9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

War, from 1996-7, in which Rwanda invaded the DRC to stop attacks on their border and to protect fellow Tutsis from the continued terror. The affected Banyamulenge, along with the RPF Rwandan government and a new leader named Laurent-Desire Kabila, combined forces to create the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL), which confronted the Hutu extremists and aimed to oust President Mobutu, whom they felt did nothing to address the violence in the region.¹¹ The war's culmination resulted in replacing Mobutu with Kabila as president, the Rwanda-backed leader who claimed he would address the Kivu situation.¹²

Yet, the Congo and its neighbors soon found out that Kabila's new government was similar to the last. With the country greatly in debt, a corrupt political system, and very exclusive wealthy clientele, Kabila still did not meet popular demands for political representation and addressing his citizens' many grievances.¹³ Early in his term, Kabila alienated his Rwandan allies, causing the formation of an anti-Kabila group called the RCD, Congolese Rally for Democracy. The RCD, made up of Rwandan and Ugandan forces and the Banyamulenge, launched a violent campaign to topple Kabila's government and continued their struggle against the Hutu extremist group FDLR, who were still massacring Tutsi and encroaching on RPF jurisdiction.

His government threatened, Kabila called on regional support, involving a myriad of other African countries to aid in fighting the RCD. This culminated in the Second Congo War from 1998-2003, which involved eight African nations and over twenty armed groups aiming to oust Kabila. The resulting violence killed over 5 million people and displaced many more.¹⁴ This period marked the most severe fighting in the Kivu region, as Hutu/Tutsi ethnic divides were manipulated in the power struggle between RCD and Kabila supporters, claiming the lives of thousands of innocent civilians.¹⁵

¹¹ Jason K. Stearns, "North Kivu: The background to conflict in North Kivu province of eastern Congo," Rift Valley Institute: Usalama Project, 2012, pp. 31.

¹² Stearns, "North Kivu," 31-2.

¹³ Kisangani, *Civil Wars in the DRC*, 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 32.

¹⁵ Stearns, "North Kivu," 33-4.

A UN-supported peace agreement was signed in 2003 that called for the disarmament of all rebel groups and new elections to replace country leaders. During the war, Laurent-Desire Kabila was assassinated and replaced by his son, Joseph Kabila; the transitional government of 2003 recognized and supported the new Kabila's government and promoted the disarmament and integration of RCD forces into the DRC army.¹⁶ The RCD, however, was not satisfied, as the peace deal left little protection for the Tutsis who found security from the RCD, a group now being told to disarm and integrate into the national army. One RCD leader, General Laurent Nkunda, refused, with others, to join the national army, creating a split between Hutus and Tutsis as many Hutus in the RCD allied with Kabila's new government and many Tutsis formed a new group called the CNDP (National Congress for the Defense of the People), headed by Nkunda. The CNDP, created in 2006, strove to meet the needs and demands of the Tutsis living in the Kivus, eliminate the terrorizing FDLR rebels, and stop genocidal violence that kept Banyamulenge Tutsis from peacefully living in the DRC. Despite its organizational prowess, creating websites and advertising campaigns to spread CNDP-oriented anti-genocide ideology, the CNDP faced attacks in 2006 and 2007 by UN and DRC government troops alike for their tendencies for brutal counterinsurgencies against alleged FDLR members and anyone they considered anti-CNDP.¹⁷

After an embarrassing defeat by the CNDP in December 2007, the DRC government decided on a new tactic.¹⁸ They organized a formal peace conference called the Goma Conference in January 2008, which prompted a brief ceasefire as Kabila again tried to integrate the rebel CNDP forces into the national army.¹⁹ Violence commenced as Nkunda's CNDP still resisted integration and continued to assert their goals. Following the peace conference, the CNDP's second-in-command, General Bosco Ntaganda, split from Nkunda to create a coalition between the CNDP and the

¹⁶ Ibid, 35.

¹⁷ Jason K. Stearns, "From CNDP to M23: The evolution of an armed movement in eastern Congo," Rift Value Institute: Usalama Project, 2012, pp. 26.

¹⁸ Ibid, 28-31.

¹⁹ Stearns, "CNDP to M23," 32.

governments of Rwanda and the DRC.²⁰ Ntaganda, with Rwandan and DRC support, assumed full leadership over the CNDP to oversee their successful integration into FARDC, and Nkunda was removed from the scene via an arrest by the Rwandan government.²¹ The objectives of the new coalition were to jointly combat the Hutu extremists of the FDLR and to finally integrate the CNDP into the national army.²² Hence, on March 23, 2009, Ntaganda signed an agreement with Rwanda and the DRC to finalize the merger between the CNDP and FARDC.²³

However, as the integration progressed, it appeared that Ntaganda was using the Goma Conference's mandate of integrating CNDP's forces into the national army to gain power and prestige in the Kivu areas.²⁴ The DRC government itself attempted to restrain Ntaganda's growing power, when it saw that the 2011-2012 elections would hardly be fair with the warlord's overpowering presence in the region.²⁵ As Ntaganda began to fall out of favor with Kabila's government, CNDP soldiers still loyal to the ousted Nkunda felt increasingly frustrated with the process of integration into the army, and after several failed mutinies, eventually broke off from FARDC to create the M23 movement.²⁶

Headed by an Nkunda supporter named General Sultani Emmanuel Makenga and backed by the Rwandan government, the M23 seeks to implement the failed March 23, 2009 agreement to fully integrate the armed CNDP into national forces.²⁷ The M23 has engaged in myriad battles with the national army, FARDC, causing countless civilian casualties and general unrest in the region. Recent Human Rights Watch reports document major human rights abuses perpetrated on both sides, including crimes committed by FARDC soldiers against ordinary citizens as well as M23 fighters.²⁸ With

²⁰ Ibid, 34.

²¹ Ibid, 35.

²² Ibid, 34.

²³ Ibid, 35.

²⁴ Ibid, 39-40.

²⁵ Ibid, 40.

²⁶ Ibid, 42-4.

²⁷ Stearns, "CNDP to M23," 44.

²⁸ Human Rights Watch, "DRC Congo: M23 Rebels Kill, Rape Civilians," accessed December 1, 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/07/22/dr-congo-m23-rebels-kill-rape-civilians>.

the implementation of a Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) by the Security Council in March 2013, UN troops joined FARDC in militarily seeking out and engaging M23 rebels to try and quell the violence.²⁹ In early November of 2013, the joint UN and FARDC force defeated M23, who has agreed to lay down arms and pursue its demands politically.³⁰

Evidently, the choices made in foreign and domestic policy to address rebel movements in the region over the last few decades have focused on the implementation of thus far unsuccessful peace talks, U.N. missions, and disarmament policies. These policies aim to disarm and disband the rebel groups, assuming that by disbanding the rebel movement and forcing them to lay down their weapons, the conflict will be resolved and the violence will stop. Yet, the M23 rebel group is not an isolated movement; it is part of a resistance movement that has been going on for decades—evidenced in the progression of RCD to CNDP to its current manifestation, M23. There have also been recent reports of M23 recruitment in neighboring Rwanda and Uganda, despite their disarmament in November 2013.³¹ Consequently, policy approaches that seek forced disarmaments clearly do not address the root causes of the conflict, as M23 follows the historic trend of other disbanded rebel groups in the region and recruits once again.

The continuous disarmament and re-recruitment process has created a cycle of violence, one that political economist Mark Duffield (1994) terms a “permanent state of emergency.” Over its turbulent history, the Kivu region has experienced an ordinary state of prolonged violence stemming from protracted economic and political crisis that leaves citizens without access to resources or structured avenues through which to assert demands.

²⁹ The Associated Press, “U.N. Approves New Force to Pursue Congo’s Rebels,” *New York Times*, March 28, 2013, accessed November 29, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/29/world/africa/un-approves-new-force-to-pursue-congos-rebels.html>.

³⁰ Nicholas Kulish, “After Outside Pressure, Rebels in Congo Lay Down Their Arms,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2013, accessed November 29, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/06/world/africa/m23-rebels-democratic-republic-congo.html>.

³¹ “UN says M23 recruiting in Rwanda,” *The East African*, January 24, 2014, accessed July 1, 2014, <http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/UN-says-M23-recruiting-in-Rwanda/-/2558/2158628/-/item/0/-/8k62h7/-/index.html>.

In situations of permanent emergency, Duffield illuminates the creativity of human agency in the ways people deal with such crises. He argues that when people are left without their typical means of accessing resources, they come up with other ways to access them that often depart from normative methods and even legal means.³²

M23 specifically uses force as a coping strategy within the political emergency engulfing the Kivus. African studies scholars Chabal and Daloz (1999) argue that the use of violence as a means of survival begins to appear as a very rational act when viewed within the context of a permanent state of emergency. Because corrupt and dysfunctional state structures cannot support its citizens or provide the usual protection, ordinary citizens begin to regard force as a resource, or “currency,” for gaining access to what has been denied to them. For members of M23, force has become a necessary means for leverage in a context where citizen voices and demands are simply not heard. Additionally, Human Rights Watch confirms that citizens cannot rely on state-sponsored forces for protection either since the national army FARDC has also committed grave crimes against humanity in the ongoing conflict.³³ Consequently, M23 uses violence as a form of “currency,” one of the few available when other means to survive prove inaccessible.

Yet, using the existence of a prolonged state of emergency to rationalize extreme violence, as these authors argue, is much too simple. Larger structures of power are at work here, ones that cannot be explained away by citing the Kivu’s permanent state of emergency. I argue that M23’s use of direct, physical violence juxtaposes a much more ordinary form of violence in the form of naming. Based in the work of the foundational political theorist Carl Schmitt, the analysis of naming deals significantly with the act of defining limits on an object or entity to fix it to a stable, legible meaning. For Schmitt, naming forms the foundation of politics by dividing groups, entities, or individuals into the fixed categories of friends and enemies. Naming thus seeks to simplify and to provide easy understanding

³² Mark Duffield, “The Political Economy of Internal War: Asset Transfer, Complex Emergencies and International Aid,” in Joanna Macrae and Antony Zwi, eds., *War and Hunger: Rethinking International Responses to Complex Emergencies* (London: Zed Books, 1994), 51.

³³ Human Rights Watch, “DRC Congo: M23 Rebels Kill, Rape Civilians.”

in the form of recognizably distinct categories—an act that does violence to the particularities of a group like M23.

In assigning the intelligible name of “rebel” to the M23 movement, the act of naming simplifies the actor’s ambiguities to the boundaries embedded in the term and provides only a limited range of contestation to its meaning. For the “rebel,” according to Jason Stearns (2011), this means a sensationalized oversimplification that presents the rebel as an irrational, bloodthirsty, and savage soldier, who rapes and loots in a chaotic frenzy. The actors of the M23 movement are confined within this decontextualized social category of the illegitimate, savage rebel soldier—leaving no room for other forms of identity.

Philosopher Jacques Derrida (1994) illuminates this more ordinary form of violence implicit within the act of naming. He argues that by assuming the name fully embodies that which is named, we do violence to the possibilities available to the named concept or entity. Naming depoliticizes and decontextualizes, creating a perception of the M23 movement as another bloodthirsty rebel group needing to be disarmed. The ordinary form of violence, then, is in the perception of this group as named “rebels.” Essentially, naming is a subtler form of violence and oppression that negates the efforts to reduce the violence in the Kivu region, which recent policy attempts to address.

The assumption within various policy approaches that the violence will cease only by disarming the savage and violent rebel not only disregards M23’s existence within a prolonged state of emergency, in which the use of violence is rendered ordinary, but also traps them within the confines of their name. M23’s status as an illegal, bloodthirsty rebel group is assumed, meant only to be disarmed and shut down. In ignoring the context of existing within a perpetual state of violence, the name of “rebel” renders M23 immobile, stuck within the confines of a paralyzing social category, meant only to be disarmed.

Significantly, the examination of M23’s context, where survival often means using violence, we begin to restore their humanity, presenting the M23 as persons who survive by using force as a means to that end. Perceived in this way, M23 rebels move from being faceless, irrational soldiers to humans with agency. Humanizing M23 by situating them in their context may offer other policy approaches that will not promote continuous re-emergences and rebirths of rebel movements seeking to address the same

issues over the years. The actors who make up M23 are complicated beyond the simple definition of “rebel”—people with choices, with reasons for turning to violence, and with intricate histories of oppression and violence. Their struggle does not fall into easy categories; the Kivu conflict does not only involve two parties and the issues are not black-and-white. But with policy approaches that categorize the M23 actors as reckless rebels and that seek resolution through disarmament, the very human lives of M23 members are reduced so as to perpetuate the very violence and conflict policymakers seek to eliminate. Policy can do something to address the needs of millions of people in this war-torn part of the Congo, but it must situate the M23 movement, not within the rigid and fixed conceptualizations of the “rebel” but within its contextually unique history. Policymakers must complicate the actors involved and seek to understand the conflict in order for violence to cease.

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