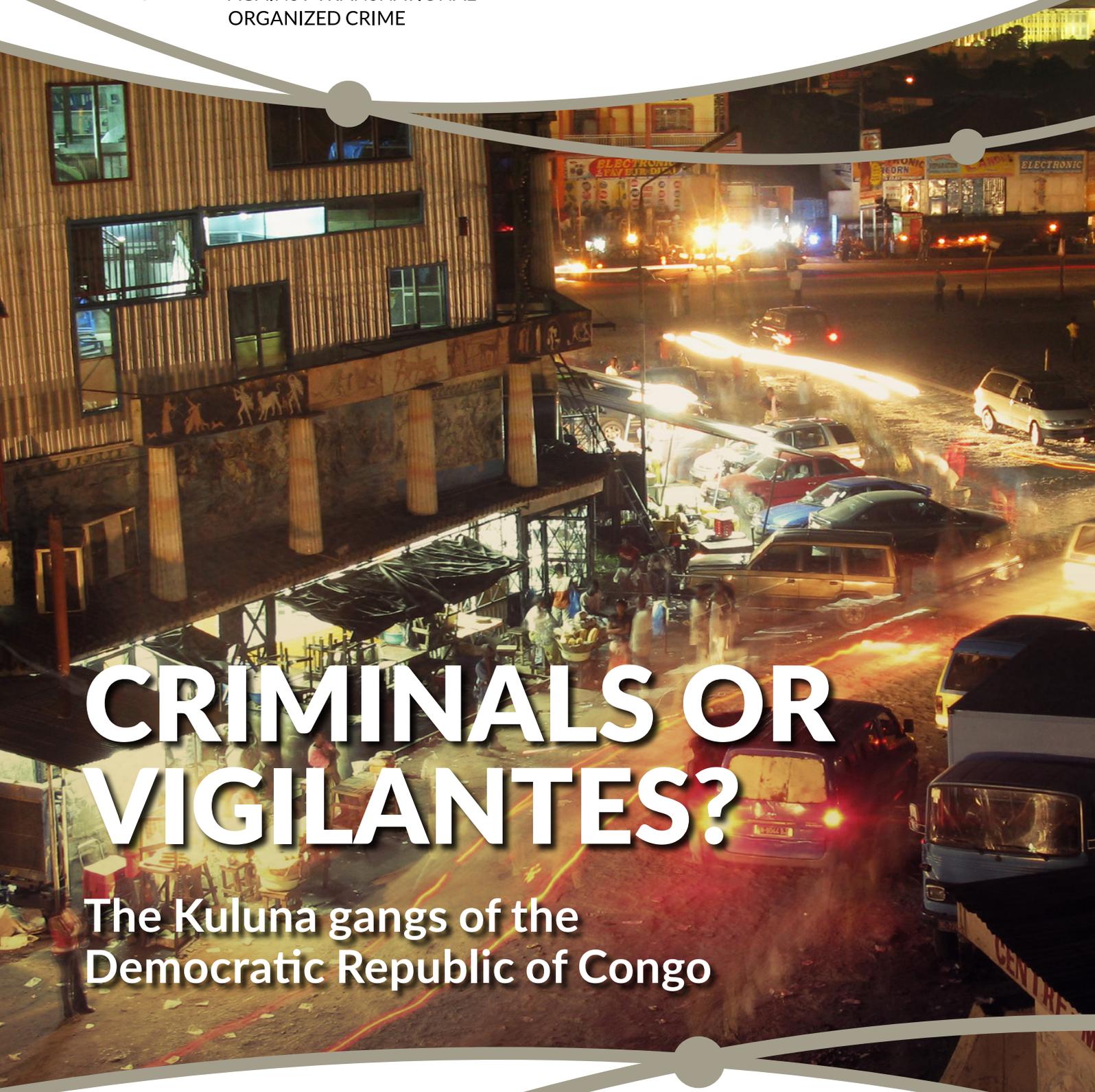




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CRIMINALS OR VIGILANTES?

The Kuluna gangs of the
Democratic Republic of Congo

Marc-André Lagrange and Thierry Vircoulon

MAY 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit for funding this research. We are grateful to our local advisors Dasol, Bantu Lukambo, Viko and Fab, who provided access to the Kinshasa gang scene and invaluable insights into the gangs' activities and way of life. We would also like to thank Veronique Moufflet for her photographic contribution and professor Sara Liwerant of Kinshasa University for her pioneering work on the Kuluna gangs.

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SUMMARY

The current rise in insecurity in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), is often attributed to urban youth gangs – the Kulunas. Embedded in Kinshasa’s neighbourhood life and partnered with local political parties and law

enforcement agencies, these gangs threaten urban security in the city. This paper examines the rise of the Kulunas from a historical and sociological perspective, and analyzes the state’s security responses to address it.

Key points

- Since the beginning of 2020, there has been a new surge in Kuluna activity in Kinshasa, resulting in a rise in serious crimes, including armed robbery and violent assaults.
- Kuluna gangs are no longer solely a Kinshasa crime phenomenon but the problem has also become widespread in smaller cities.
- Past and current policy approaches focused on violent police repression have failed, creating counterproductive consequences.
- It is now necessary to develop a social approach focused on prevention strategies and a strong judiciary response.
- The gang problem indicates that one of the major challenges in the DRC in the coming years will be urban security governance.



INTRODUCTION

Since Félix Tshisekedi, the president of the DRC, came to power in 2019, news about the rise of insecurity in the capital city, Kinshasa, has been reported daily. Urban youth gangs, known as the Kulunas, are blamed for this. However, the gangs are not a new phenomenon: they emerged at the beginning of the 21st century and their historical roots are almost as old as the city itself.

These gangs are barely known outside of the DRC. Initially, the gangs were associated specifically with Kinshasa, but they have now been spreading to other cities, even crossing the Congo River and causing insecurity and a brutal police backlash in the capital of neighbouring Republic of Congo, Brazzaville.

Kinshasa, the capital of the DRC, has seen a surge of criminal activity in the past two years.

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Kuluna

From the Lingala verb *kolona*, 'to plant', 'to cultivate'. The word is a derivative of the French 'coloniser' while also referring to the military term *colonne*, meaning 'walking in line'. The term was first used in the 1990s to refer to the DRC's south-western urban youngsters illegally entering northern Angola in search of diamonds. Since 2000 the term has become a generic way to name criminals. The word 'Kuluna' is now used in specific expressions to identify categories of criminals. For instance, *Kuluna en cols blancs* (white-collar Kuluna) and *Kuluna en cravate* (tie-wearing Kuluna) refer to business criminals, and *Kuluna en uniformes* (Kuluna in uniform) refers to racketeering police and military personnel.¹

Despite their infamous reputation, there are very few studies about the Kulunas. Most of the information stems from the Congolese media, which focuses on the violence perpetrated by the gangs, and communities' dissatisfaction with urban crime and police reactions. Because of this specific perspective, news reports do not provide much information about the gangs or their way of life.

This paper aims to fill this gap by offering a historical and sociological snapshot of the Kuluna gangs, complementing the growing body of research about street gangs elsewhere in Africa. Research for this paper was conducted through an extensive desk review and interviews with various stakeholders, such as politicians, academics, journalists and priests. Some respondents had dealt directly or indirectly with the gangs, and others were former or active gang members. The latter provided invaluable information about their daily activities, lifestyle and perspectives on life.

The Kulunas have established criminal partnerships with some elements within the police force and various political parties, and the government is seeking to counter this with violent policy responses. This paper argues that this state-sanctioned violence is so far a dead end and that it has had serious counterproductive consequences, and suggests that there may be a window of opportunity for a strategy that combines repression and prevention.

Violent police responses have been the government's main approach to gang activity in the DRC. © Lionel Healing/AFP via Getty Images





THE YOUTH GANGS OF KINSHASA

The Kuluna gangs cannot not be understood without some knowledge of their contextual environment. Established in the 19th century, Kinshasa was a small colonial outpost that experienced rapid urban growth in the 1950s. Today, with a population of 12 million, it is the biggest city in central Africa and its population numbers are still rising. Urbanization has been unmanageable, and the majority of the city's inhabitants are under 25 years of age. From an administrative perspective, Kinshasa is both a city and a province. As a result, it has a provincial assembly and is run by a governor.

Street youth gangs first appeared in the city in the 1950s. Known as the Bills or the Yankees, these gangs were the first manifestation of youth violence in Kinshasa's townships. Later, with the political and economic decline brought about by the regime of former president Mobutu Sese Seko in the 1990s, urban areas became new territories for unemployed youth from the country's rural areas, who migrated to the city to make a living. As the country fell into an unprecedented economic crisis, unemployed youngsters took over the streets trying to survive by any means possible.²

Kuluna gangs first appeared as a social phenomenon around the year 2000, in a context of state collapse and complete breakdown of law and order.³ During this period of anarchy and civil war, the street gangs were located in the poorest districts of Kinshasa, such as Yolo, Limete, Matete and Makala. Since then and despite several police crackdowns, they have expanded to the rest of the city and, as mentioned, also spread to other cities.

Gang fighting is an essential part of the Kuluna way of life.

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Street youth gangs first appeared in Kinshasa in the 1950s, when the city's urban growth increased dramatically.

© Michel Huet/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images

The gangs gradually moved from Kinshasa's suburban areas, where the police did not dare to venture, to central districts and to military and police camps. They now even recruit their members among the children of police and army officers. 'You know, here, in Lingwala, the children of the PNC [Congoese National Police] are all Kuluna,' said an inhabitant from Lingwala, a municipality of Kinshasa.⁴ Today, besides Gombe, the downtown central district, where the government ministries and embassies are located, there are no areas in the city where the Kuluna gangs are not present. The gangs, however, are generally located in the poor neighbourhoods and slums of the city, including Lingwala and Barumbu, and in the central poor districts, like Kasa Vubu, Ngiri Ngiri, Kalamu, Bumbu, Makala and Limete. They are also present in military camps, such as Camp Muganga, N'Djili, Kimbanseke, Masina and Camp Ceta.

These gangs are territorial in terms of their operations; they 'own' a neighbourhood, assaulting strangers passing by their territory but not targeting those who live there. Several gangs can co-habit in the same neighbourhood, with a governance system that follows a hierarchy based on their reputation and capacity for violence. The most notorious gangs also 'sponsor' the new ones. Each neighbourhood also has a number of small unknown Kuluna gangs: only those established for some time have earned a name and the ability to control a territory (see Figure 1).

To be accepted in a Kuluna gang, aspirant members must prove their strength and fighting capacity.⁵ They have to endure a test period during which elder members subject them to violence,⁶ and during which they are required to provide services, like supplying alcohol and drugs. Respect and a place among the entourage of a gang leader are earned by attacking and wounding members of rival gangs. 'I wanted to be strong and respected, so I became a Kuluna. Because I was strong during the fights, I earned my place in the [gang],' explained one gang member.⁷

Gang fighting is an essential part of the Kuluna way of life, almost as important as criminal activities. In the Kuluna world, it is important to earn the respect of other gangs. At nightfall, youth gangs transform the streets of Kinshasa's slums into fighting arenas characterized by inter-gang violence. Gangs also form alliances, which tend to be highly volatile, as are the gangs themselves.

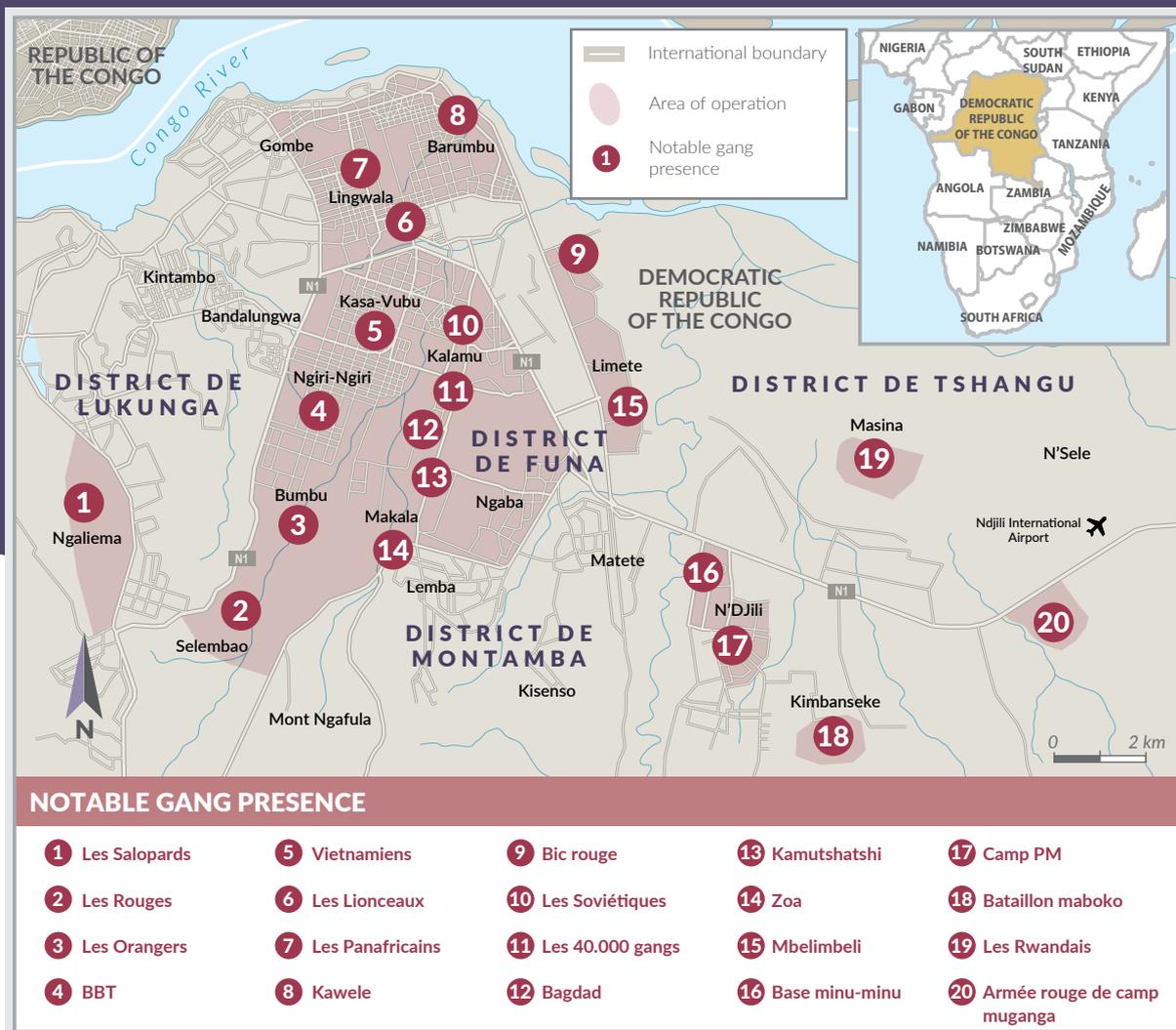


FIGURE 1 A non-exhaustive list of the main Kuluna gangs of Kinshasa.

Motives to join the gangs vary, but the most common is to enact revenge on society. Most of the Kulunas interviewed said they had joined gangs after being robbed or assaulted. One gang member said that the Kulunas from another neighbourhood had attacked his mother while she was selling bread. 'So, I decided to show them, and I became a Kuluna too,' he said.⁸

Youths said that they became driven to join Kuluna gangs out of a feeling that justice and retribution are absent, in order to punish the perpetrators and to protect themselves and their relatives.⁹ Paradoxically, self-defence and a sense of justice are motivating factors for becoming involved in criminal gangs. Although Kinshasa has particularly high levels of poverty,¹⁰ the motive for becoming a Kuluna was not presented by respondents as poverty, but rather as an expression of anger, injustice and frustration. Becoming a Kuluna therefore gives many young men a sense of security and justice, which, they perceive, the failed Congolese authorities are unable to provide. Another driver is an element of pride in belonging to a Kuluna gang. When one belongs to a high-ranking gang in the Kuluna hierarchy, it can be seen as a sign of personal success and of having a social status in the slum.¹¹



Rapper Papy Mbavu, whose hit song 'Kotazo' symbolized a call for peace during violent clashes sparked by the 2006 elections.

When local residents are victims of Kulunas from another neighbourhood, they can turn to the gangs in their own neighbourhood in order to avenge them and retaliate.¹² In this sense, while the Kuluna gangs are perceived as an urban threat, at the same time they also provide a form of security for the local inhabitants, playing a vigilante role in contexts where the police are barely present or even absent. They fill a security vacuum at the local level while exerting violence only outside their territory.¹³ Sometimes, Kulunas receive the support of police officers, often former gang members who later enrolled with the police.¹⁴

In addition, unlike the street children, called the Shegwey, the Kulunas are well integrated in their social urban environment. All those interviewed lived with their families and had, or used to have, a job. Kulunas work in the informal economy and are not considered social outcasts.

The Kulunas' cultural environment is rooted in the rap music scene. Inspired by gangster rap from the US,¹⁵ 'hardcore' Congolese rap music has become the mark of the Kuluna gangs. Among the locally recognized rap musicians, the best known are the Salopards, composed of former gang members and named after a Kuluna gang, and Papy Mbavu.¹⁶

Kuluna music embodies violence, sex and manhood. Very much like the punk movement of the 1970s, it is based on provocation and moral transgression. Kuluna music artists are harassed by the authorities and their concerts are often clandestine. Often undermined by drugs and alcoholism, and crippled by violence and poverty, their music is not popular and generates very little money. However, the Kinshasa rap scene is gaining popularity, and Kuluna rap music has been replaced by songs promoting education, peace and gender inclusion, among other social initiatives.

Alleged members of one of the many Kuluna gangs in Kinshasa. © Veronique Moufflet





CRIMINAL PARTNERSHIPS

As entrepreneurs of violence, the Kuluna gangs interact with political parties and law enforcement agencies, notably the Congolese police force. Mutual interests drive these symbiotic interactions, which can be described as criminal partnerships.

Political mercenaries

For the political parties, the Kuluna gangs are seen as a contractable workforce that can be hired by politicians for various purposes related to the deployment of violence in the political arena. As a pool of violence, the Kulunas are tasked with intimidating political rivals, disrupting their public gatherings, and providing protection to politicians, among other duties. The Kulunas are hired on a daily fee basis and usually earn between 1 000 and 3 000 Congolese francs each (between US\$0.50 and US\$1.50).

The services of gang members are especially in demand in times of elections. In the DRC, electoral violence has been systematic since the 2006 elections,¹⁷ and campaigns mostly happen in the streets, with rival parties making a show of force in the public space through demonstrations and public gatherings. Kulunas are hired by politicians to sabotage other parties' demonstrations, and to attend mass gatherings, public meetings or sports events in order to rob people, often accompanied by violence.

In the 2006 elections, when forces supporting rival candidates Joseph Kabila and Jean-Pierre Bemba clashed, Bemba factions hired Kulunas as fighters, giving them

Political parties hire Kuluna gangs during election periods to provide protection and intimidate other candidates. Above, President Félix Tshisekedi during a campaign rally in Kinshasa in 2018. © Luis Tato/ AFP via Getty Images



Former president Joseph Kabila during the 2011 elections. His party's security service was run by one prominent Kuluna gang member. © Sunday Times via Getty Images

access to firearms. After Bemba's defeat, the newly formed Rapid Intervention Police force conducted a violent repression, targeting armed Kuluna members.

During the 2011 elections, the Kulunas were recruited by the political party of the incumbent president, Kabila, to terrorize the Kinshasa population and attack opposition political rallies. Journalists and civil society activists who publicized this were arrested and intimidated by the security services.¹⁸ Similarly, from 2016 to 2018, during a political campaign by the opposition to force President Kabila to hold elections, the Kulunas were mobilized by the ruling party and by the anti-riot police, who used them as auxiliaries.

The wealthiest political parties have their own security service, usually provided by the youth branch of the party. But sometimes they outsource security by commandeering 'muscle' among the Kulunas. One gang member, Mushi Ndibu, ran the security service for Kabila's party, the People's Party for Reconstruction and Democracy. A judo champion, Ndibu was tasked with recruiting young men, including Kulunas, to secure the party's events.¹⁹

Similarly, Tshisekedi's party, the Union for Democracy and Social Progress, has its own security service mainly recruited on an ethnic basis among the *wewa*, young motorcycle-taxi drivers who migrated to Kinshasa.²⁰ Recruiting Kulunas as a source of monetizable violence enables political parties to pretend not to be involved directly in the violence and to attribute the blame to criminal gangs. However, most of the time, both the Kulunas and the politicians are open about their working relationship.²¹ When Kulunas are arrested, it is not uncommon for politicians to discreetly contact the police and justice authorities to arrange their release.

The Kuluna gangs do not harbour political allegiances and, indeed, like many Congolese, the gangs are critical of the political class. But they do play a role in Congolese electoral campaigns as political 'mercenaries'. Even though it can be tempting to interpret this working relationship as a youth politicization process, it is in fact based entirely on mutual interest. Politics and politicians have a very negative image among the Kulunas, and vice versa.

Partners in crime

The relationship between the Kuluna gangs and the police, justice and military authorities is ambiguous. Legally speaking, the police are charged with combating criminal youth gangs, but in reality, the police service is probably the gangs' most important partner in crime. In the DRC, the implementation of the rule of law is something to be negotiated, and the security forces themselves are involved in a range of illegal activities. It is a partnership of local criminal interests that blurs the lines between police and gangs, between the legal order and the criminal world.

The police service is not the only law enforcement agency in charge of urban security. In fact, the army is active in the major cities and often gets involved in incidents of political repression, as keeping control of Kinshasa has proven to be of strategic importance in Congolese history. The police and the army are not only notorious for their disproportionate use of force, but are also known for corruption and illegal revenue-generating schemes.²² The Kulunas participate in some of these activities, mainly with the police. This gang-police complicity is so well known that, in Congolese street language, criminal elements within the police are referred to as 'Kulunas in uniform'.

Policemen and military officers are paid to turn a blind eye, and they subcontract some criminal activities (mainly theft and robberies) to the youth gangs. This cooperative practice between law enforcement agencies and criminals is quite common. Security personnel are bribed by gangs to let them do their business, while some are involved in the gangs' operations, in the form of providing gangs with weapons, information and protection, and re-selling stolen goods.

In Bunia, the capital of Ituri province, a military deputy commander, Colonel Bonane Habarugira, reportedly became notoriously involved with the urban gangs. Between 2011 and 2013, urban crime levels increased, with Bonane being reported as sponsoring criminal networks in the city, including by providing them with weapons.²³

Many reports have documented the clientelist networks existing between the security forces and youth gangs in various Congolese cities.²⁴ As a result of the cooperation between the police and Kuluna gangs, police officers help some gangs fight their rivals and exert their influence in case of arrests. Indeed, Kulunas are often released without being sentenced, causing outrage among the public. If a police accomplice, friend or relative is unable to set them free, their release may be negotiated by politicians, local leaders or family members, who bribe the police and justice authorities.²⁵ This cooperative relationship is often based on neighbourhood alliances between a street gang and staff of the local police station.



POLICY RESPONSES

Government responses to gang activity in the DRC have so far involved widespread arrests and violent police operations.

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Initially, Kabila's government was slow to take the Kuluna security problem into consideration. Its first attempt to legally control the Kuluna gangs was in 2007 and, given its failure, it resorted to a brutal and illegal crackdown in 2013. Despite the failure of this repressive policy and growing public discontent, Tshisekedi's newly elected government has not yet been able to formulate another, more effective approach.

Mass detainment

Countering the Kuluna gangs first became a political priority after the 2006 elections. In 2007, then justice minister Luzolo Bambi coordinated a crackdown on the Kuluna gangs in the capital, and the arrested gang members were swiftly sentenced. The authorities sent them to remote prisons, where they would be 're-educated'. Given the fact that family support is necessary to survive in a Congolese prison, it was a harsh punishment.

However, despite the tough sentencing, the Kuluna gangs continued to proliferate in Kinshasa, instilling fear among inhabitants, who blamed the authorities for the gang crisis.²⁶ The gang issue was repeatedly debated in government circles over the years. As the gang security problem escalated, so did public discontent. Meanwhile, human rights organizations raised the flag on the Kuluna issue as a serious security problem that needed to be urgently addressed.²⁷

Operation Iron Fist

As a response to the mounting public discontent, the government decided to step up the fight against the Kuluna gangs, setting up a dedicated police unit and launching the notorious Likofi operation in 2013 (Likofi means 'iron fist' in Lingala). During the first Likofi operation between November 2013 and February 2014, the Congolese police summarily executed at least 51 young men and boys, and forcibly 'disappeared' 31 others. The Likofi policy had two major consequences.

Firstly, it caused tensions between the DRC and neighbouring Republic of Congo. Because of the Likofi operation, many Kulunas fled to Brazzaville – located just opposite Kinshasa, on the Congo river – causing an unusual crime surge there at the start of 2014. In response, police in Brazzaville launched an operation initially targeting the youth gangs from Kinshasa – a crackdown that quickly turned into an abusive anti-immigration operation.²⁸ In just a couple of months, about 60 000 people were expelled with the help of the military from Brazzaville to Kinshasa.

This caused a diplomatic row between the two governments, as the repatriation was violent, massive and unexpected. With this operation, the Republic of Congo made it clear that it was not ready to accept its neighbour's Kuluna gangs, and that DRC citizens living in Brazzaville would pay the price. It also demonstrated that security coordination between the two countries was then non-existent.

Congolese from the DRC are forcefully deported from neighbouring Republic of Congo as part of an anti-immigration crackdown triggered by Kuluna activity in Brazzaville, April 2014. © Junior D. Kannah/AFP via Getty Images



For some ... the purpose of Likofi IV was to increase terror in Kinshasa and send a message to the Kulunas as political mercenaries: work for the ruling party or die.

Secondly, the assassination strategy deployed in Operation Likofi did not go unnoticed, and triggered tensions between the Congolese government and some international organizations. The United Nations Human Rights office in Kinshasa and Human Rights Watch made public and documented these extrajudicial executions in two separate reports in 2014.²⁹ The Congolese government expelled the UN human rights director in Congo, denied any wrongdoing and then launched an internal investigation that ended in 2016 with the conviction of some low-level policemen.

The UN report triggered widespread condemnation and led the UK and the US to suspend their police reform programmes in Kinshasa. In June 2016, the US imposed sanctions on General Célestin Kanyama, then police commander in Kinshasa, and the EU sanctioned him in December 2016. Prior to this, in May 2016, the Congolese government released its evaluation report on Operation Likofi I, acknowledging that there had been several shortcomings in the operation partly due to the lack of briefings and dissemination of orders at all levels. At least 14 police officers were later arrested and convicted without the ability to appeal, while three others were convicted *in absentia*. However, no commanding officers have ever been investigated or brought to justice in relation to the operation.³⁰

From 2013 to 2018, a total of four Likofi operations were carried out, all including the targeted assassinations of gang members. To date, this policy has been the only response of the various administrations since 2013, and it has failed to solve the Kuluna problem.

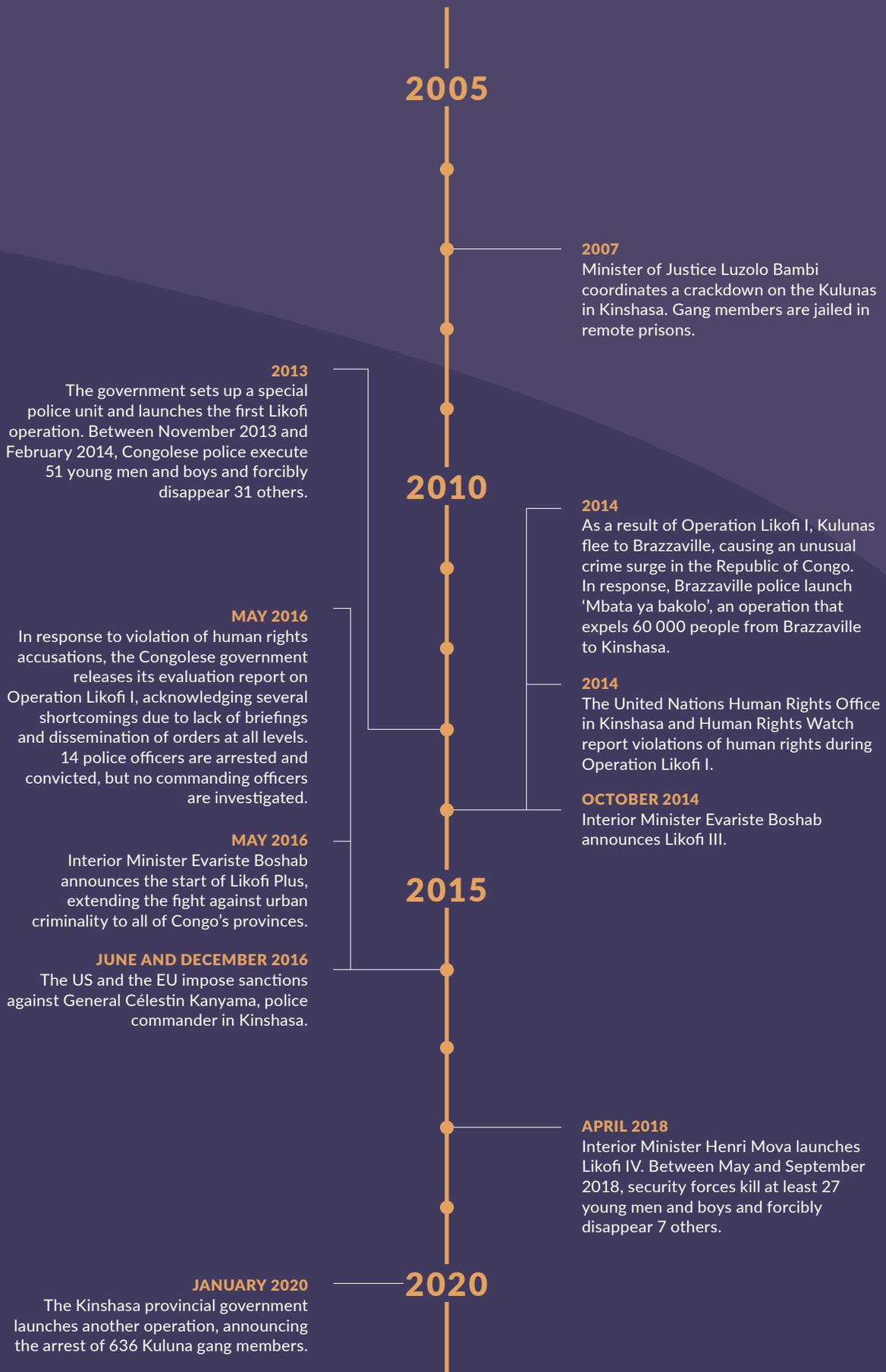
During the fourth Likofi operation, between May and September 2018 security forces summarily killed at least 27 young men and boys, and forcibly disappeared seven others. Police officers, often disguised as civilians, apprehended suspected gang members without warrant, took them to unidentified locations and killed them.³¹

The timing of the Likofi IV operation was questioned, as it happened during a very tense electoral year: in 2018, Kabila was attempting to postpone the election by any means possible and the opposition was organizing street protests. For some respondents, the purpose of Likofi IV was to increase terror in Kinshasa and send a message to the Kulunas as political mercenaries: work for the ruling party or die.³²

In 2020, the Kinshasa provincial government launched yet another operation. On 1 January 2020, the governor announced the arrest of 636 Kuluna gang members.³³ Currently, local TV channels and radio stations regularly report the arrests of Kulunas across the capital. Led by the Kinshasa governor, a member of Kabila's party, the operation was seen as an opportunity for supporters loyal to former president Kabila to blame Tshisekedi for the gang-driven urban insecurity.³⁴

However, the lack of coordination between the police and justice authorities led to the failure of the operation. After Kinshasa's governor announced the relaunch of the deportation policy, justice authorities released more than 700 Kulunas because prisons were overcrowded.³⁵

POLICY RESPONSES





CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased levels of poverty in the DRC, resulting in a rise in Kuluna criminal activity.

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The brutal repression of youth gangs by police forces has neither solved nor contained the Kuluna problem. The Kulunas are still responsible for serious crimes in Kinshasa, including armed robbery and violent assaults,³⁶ and, since the beginning of 2020, there has been a surge of Kuluna activity in Kinshasa and other cities, such as Matadi, Lubumbashi,³⁷ Mbandaka and Kikwit.³⁸

The failure of the heavy-handed law enforcement response to the gangs is recognized by police personnel and magistrates, and they are both blamed by the population. Police and justice authorities are accused of powerlessness and complicity with the Kuluna gangs, and are considered as part of the problem rather than the solution. The people's frustration sometimes leads to mob justice: gang members are beaten in public or even killed.

Despite growing discontent, the government has not yet come up with an alternative policy, and municipal authorities are left to deal with a problem that they cannot address. As a result, a shift is noticeable within public opinion. Fully aware of the failure of police repression, various voices (politicians, local NGOs and academics, among others) are now publicly advocating for a social approach to the Kuluna problem.

Several radio debates show that this idea is gaining traction, academic studies about the Kulunas point to a need for a social approach,³⁹ while some Congolese NGOs are now exploring this option.⁴⁰ However, whether this public opinion shift will translate into new policy initiatives or not remains to be seen.

In addition to previous failed policy initiatives, the coronavirus pandemic has triggered a grave economic crisis with a devastating impact on the urban poor. At the start of the pandemic, the government imposed a lockdown that was quickly lifted, as its social consequences were worse than COVID-19 itself.

As a result, the Kuluna gangs are more active than ever and the problem is very likely to become worse. 'I don't know what's happening, but since the end of the lockdown, it is as if they're all crazy. Even the old Kuluna that retired, they are back,' said a former gang member.⁴¹

Recommendations

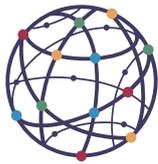
In the DRC, like in other countries facing a similar gang problem, there is no easy solution to this. While a culture of repression and authoritarianism still prevails among the Congolese governing elites, the dire economic situation constrains its capacity to develop an appropriate security approach. However, there are ways to improve urban security in the DRC, and a number of suggestions are offered:

- Authorities should immediately put an end to the murder policy implemented through the Likofi operations and strengthen the justice response to the gang problem.
- A task force made of police and justice personnel should be created in Kinshasa. This task force should target the most problematic gangs, and should expedite arrests and convictions. The convicted Kulunas should be systematically transferred to prisons far from Kinshasa. A swift government response will temporarily improve urban security and provide relief to Kinshasa's population. If this task force proves to be effective, it could be replicated in other Congolese cities facing a gang problem.
- Congolese NGOs and Kinshasa's municipal authorities should work together to develop a job creation policy targeting specifically jobless youths living in the slums. Being the recruitment pool of the Kuluna gangs, they should be the target of a prevention policy through job creation. Some recent public debates have indicated that there could be a shift from repression to social work, and some local NGOs are willing to intervene. In addition, the municipal authorities are open to new ideas. Because of the challenging budget situation facing the Congolese government, this targeted job creation policy could happen only with the support of donors.
- Given the persistent gang problem and the rapid growth of the urban population in Kinshasa and other Congolese cities, actionable research about the security governance of urban areas should be supported by the authorities and donors. As the urban population continues to grow out of control, urban security governance will be a major challenge in the coming years.

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