The Kwilu Rebellion, which ravaged large areas of western Congo (Leopoldville) in the mid-1960s, reflected the complex synthesis of a political party, a charismatic personality and religiously inspired rural movements. Within weeks of its beginning, the insurgency appeared to have produced a potent mixture of ‘bulletproof’ combatants led by an equally invulnerable Maoist commander, Pierre Mulele. The aura surrounding Mulele and his supporters soon inspired insurgent Congolese nationalists far beyond the boundaries of Kwilu Province. Although the insurrection eventually met the same fate as its Kenyan and Malgache predecessors, the Kwilu uprising demonstrated that the influence of traditional African religious beliefs had survived colonialism and the transition to independence.

URBAN REFORMERS AND RURAL RADICALS

In 1959, Belgium responded to increasingly strident Congolese demands for independence by embarking on a rapid decolonization process. This decision accelerated an already vibrant and widespread process of political mobilization which had led to the formation of numerous parties. As a result, a large field of contenders prepared to compete in the national elections due to be held shortly before independence in 1960. One of the most prominent of these new parties emerged on 1 February 1959, when a group of Kwango and Kwilu district residents living in Leopoldville established the Parti Solidaire Africain (PSA). Antoine Gizenga and Pierre Mulele served as the PSA’s President and Vice President, respectively. Both leaders were to figure prominently in the tumultuous events of the following decade.

Many of the first PSA members had belonged to the Federation Kwango Kwilu, originally established as a cultural and self-help organization. The PSA also attracted supporters from the Action Socialiste, a socialist study group previously active in Leopoldville. In 1957, the Action Socialiste had become the colony’s first officially recognized political party. Some members of Catholic and socialist-inspired labor unions in the capital also joined the PSA. The PSA’s initial administrative structure included a
National Political Bureau, a National Central Committee in charge of administrative functions, and Provincial Committees in Kikwit and Kinge, the district capitals of Kwilu and Kwango.1

As in the case of Madagascar and Kenya, urban-based, intellectual political leaders soon found themselves overtaken by a rural population which was more willing to initiate drastic action against the status quo. Several months after the party was established, PSA leaders moved out from their headquarters in Leopoldville and Kikwit to mobilize support from among residents of the surrounding rural areas. Some early PSA leaders ‘reported encountering quite a few instances in which the rural population manifested far greater militancy than they themselves desired or thought to be appropriate.’2

Many of the peasants which the PSA sought to recruit were not only more militant in favoring civil disobedience but also more radical in their attitude toward Belgian colonial authority.3 As one account of the PSA’s early activity points out, ‘Largely spontaneous rural protest triggered by repatriated city youths existed in the Kwango Kwilu prior to the emergence of political parties in this environment. This protest was harnessed or channeled by the modern elite leaders of the PSA. The goals of the leaders and the masses were never really the same – the leaders wished to Africanize the existing system while the masses appeared to wish its destruction.’4

Initial frictions between urban PSA leaders and potential rural supporters were overcome, however. The PSA’s advocacy of a political program that seemed progressive and radical facilitated the emergence of a rurally based PSA constituency which was willing, at least temporarily, to put aside its early differences with urban members of the party. Nevertheless, the radical impulses expressed by the peasantry had had a significant effect on some PSA leaders. In late 1959, the PSA and its affiliated Alliance des Bakongo (Abako) party had drawn up secret contingency plans to create a ‘government in exile’ and launch what presumably would have been a guerrilla campaign for independence in the event that Belgium delayed plans to end colonial rule. Several PSA leaders also traveled to Congo (Brazzaville) and on to Guinea possibly to acquire support for their contingency plan.5

Within a year after its establishment, the PSA’s potential ability to mobilize a significant dissident force was underscored by claims that the party ‘controlled’ 1 450 000 people. This constituency was drawn from members of 27 different ethnic groups residing in Kwango and Kwilu districts, located approximately 200 miles east of Leopoldville.6 The Belgian Congo had a total population of 14 million in 1960. What PSA ‘control’ meant is