

 [Back to Article](#)

 [Click to Print](#)

TIME

Monday, Dec. 23, 1957

BELGIAN CONGO;: Too Late, Too Little?

One cloudy, hot morning last week in Leopoldville, capital of the vast Belgian Congo (about four times the size of Texas and 77 times larger than Belgium itself), long lines of natives stood quietly in the dusty streets. Across town, amid the mangoes, palms and cassia trees of the European quarter, far fewer white citizens were similarly lined up. Belgian gradualism was making another cautious move forward, permitting the first elections—for either whites or blacks—to be held in Belgium's fabulously rich (cobalt, uranium, copper, gold) and only colony.

The voting was for urban councilors to act as "advisers" to the Belgian authorities. All males, white or black, over 25 years of age were eligible to vote. The Belgian aim is to create a "partnership" between the two races, setting them out to travel on parallel courses, but with the whites significantly senior. Thus, under the new "cities statute," Leopoldville is divided into three European communes for its population of 30,000 whites, and eight jampacked African communes for its 350,000 blacks. White and Negro mayors will be selected from the elected councilors by veteran (six years) Governor General Leon Petillon.

None of the candidates represented a political party, and the native voting generally followed tribal lines, with the numerically strong Bakongo emerging on top. Although women could not vote, they could be candidates. One African woman was elected councilor; the two white women candidates were defeated. The Belgian authorities have agreed to "consult" with the newly elected councilors but not necessarily follow their recommendations. A colonial official explained: "We will allow them to make little mistakes—but not a big nonsense."

Belgium's colonial administrators walk a tightrope over the twin volcanoes of white repression and black extremism. They have given fewer civil rights to their Africans than either the British in Nigeria (due for Dominion status in 1960) to the northwest or the French in Equatorial Africa across the Congo River. They have never had the racial clashes or race hate that flame in apartheid-cursed South Africa or in British-ruled Kenya. In fact, the only rioting in recent years occurred last summer after a badly refereed soccer game between white and black teams in Leopoldville's big King Baudouin Stadium. Since then, interracial soccer

has been banned.

Belgium's plan for the inevitable march to self-government for Africans lies in education and economic opportunity for the blacks. The multiracial, Catholic-run Lovanium University will graduate its first Negro lawyers and engineers next year. At Luluabourg, deep in the heart of the Congo, black cadets are training at the colony's first military academy. Nowhere in Africa is there such a solid, well-paid class of native technicians. Congolese pilot river and lake steamers, run locomotives, do 90% of the repair work at the big military base at Kamina. But Africans are still segregated in native quarters, must be in their own part of town by curfew—9-10 o'clock.

This week the urban elections (or "consultations," as the Belgian authorities prefer to call them) will be extended to Elisabethville and Jadotville, the largest towns in the mining province of Katanga. Next in line: Stanleyville, Bukavu, Luluabourg, Matadi. But not even unlimited economic opportunity can still the demand for political expression, which runs through Africa like a fever. Said one Congolese last week: "This didn't come soon enough, and it isn't enough."



Click to Print

Find this article at:

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,936763,00.html>

Copyright © 2012 Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Add TIME Headlines to your Site](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Customer Service](#)