

# Bringing Back the Beautiful

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Amnesty demanding liberation

**By Ben Radley**

I met Bienvenu Matumo for a drink at a popular rooftop bar in downtown Kinshasa, the sweaty, bustling capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Beneath us, the streets hum with people and the roads choke with traffic. Once fondly known as ‘Kin la Belle’ (Kin the Beautiful) by its inhabitants, today locals refer to the city as ‘Kin la Poubelle’ (Kin the Dustbin). Rubbish piles up on rubbish blocking streetways, plastic bags plug the city’s sewers and gutters leading to flooding, and minimal government services exist to remove any of it. In February, a small group of Congolese activists launched the campaign Kin Propre (Clean Kin) to overthrow the dustbin tag, and bring back the beautiful.



Bienvenu is one of them, and he has paid a high price for his activism. He is a member of [Lutte pour le Changement \(LUCHA\)](#) – ‘Fight for Change’ – a growing Congolese social movement of around 700 to 1,000 activists, organised in a decentralised horizontal network of cells of five to 20 people across nearly all of the country’s provinces. The movement was born towards the end of 2011 in Goma, a provincial capital in the east of the country, when a group of 11 university students came together, united by the belief that “[things were not going to change if society itself, if the people themselves, didn’t apply themselves directly](#)”. Bienvenu was living in Goma at the time, and joined the movement in 2013, having been inspired by the success of LUCHA’s first campaign Goma Veut de l’Eau ([Goma Wants Water](#)), which bought public water fountains to thousands of people living in the city’s outer suburbs.

Shortly after, Bienvenu moved to Kinshasa, and became active in the national campaign Bye Bye §Kabila, launched by LUCHA alongside the activist organisation Filimbi and members of the political opposition to force President Kabila to leave office upon the termination of his second mandate in December last year. For Bienvenu’s role in this campaign, he was sentenced in 2016 to twelve months in prison on charges of civil disobedience. He served six, saying of this time that “an activist going into prison leaves stronger than before...the experience strengthens us more than it weakens us”. On his release, he immediately began working on a new campaign, Kin Propre.



Bienvenu leading community action to get Kinshasa clean

A press statement released to help launch Kin Propre said:

“Given that each citizen has the right to live in a clean environment in conformity with Article 53 of the Constitution, through citizen action LUCHA will call out and denounce the inaction of the urban government authorities that have the responsibility to clean up the city of Kinshasa and restore its image as Kin the Beautiful”.

The other side of the campaign, according to Bienvenu, involves supporting people to get directly involved in cleaning up their own communities, in the face of government inaction.

On the morning of February 22nd 2017, Bienvenu and a small group of LUCHA and other activists held a peaceful sit-in demonstration in front of the Governor’s office. As soon as they sat down, Bienvenu recalled, “the police came, they beat us badly. I still have an injury here on my arm, where they beat me with batons”. Within ten minutes they had all been arrested, and within the hour, imprisoned. The conditions in prison, he said, were difficult. His first night was spent in a cell with 30 other people and no toilet. The following two nights he spent in a cell eight metres by five metres squared, shared with 40 other people and with only one toilet at the end of a narrow corridor.



Activist sit-in

Yet their arrest created a lot of attention, particularly on social media, and national and international pressure led to their release. Since the sit-in, Bienvenu says, “authorities who were inactive have become active”. A local government meeting was held to begin an operation to clean waste in eight of the city’s major communes. Smiling, he points to the

empty bins on a street below, and says rubbish has also been cleaned from sewers to allow the water to flow once again. The challenge, he says, will be to sustain the pressure and maintain the improvements.



Bienvenu, centre, in prison following sit-in

## **This is where you can help!**

### **How?**

1. [Support LUCHA directly here](#). All donations are used exclusively to further their campaigns. For Kin Propre, LUCHA wants to buy simple materials such as brooms and spades to help support community-driven responses.
2. If you live in Kinshasa, connect with [Bienvenu on Twitter @matumo\\_b](#) and get involved. The next campaign event is a march on Thursday, April 27th.
3. [Sign the online petition](#) to replace the use of plastic bags in Kinshasa with reusable and biodegradable bags.
4. Follow [LUCHA on Twitter @luchaRDC](#) and [Facebook](#), and use the hashtag #KinPropre to show your support for their campaign.



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