

HOVERING BETWEEN PEACE AND WAR: THE ELECTIONS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

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The war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) began in 1996 and now, more than twenty years later, the risk of new crises remains high. In 1996, a rebel army supported by Rwanda and Uganda, the Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaïre (AFDL), launched a military campaign against the dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko, who had been in power since 1965 thanks to Western support. In 1997, after defeating the Mobutist regime, the leader of the AFDL, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, active in the rebellion since the 1960s, became the new president of the country. The 1997 turning point, however, did not lead to peace: Kabila soon broke up with his allies, Uganda and Rwanda, accusing them of orchestrating a criminal network to plunder the country of its mineral resources, and the reaction was not long in coming. In 1998 a new rebel movement took root in the eastern region, the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD), once again supported by Uganda and Rwanda.

The second phase of the war has been characterized by the continuous proliferation of rebel movements and has cost the lives of millions of Congolese. In 2001, Laurent-Désiré Kabila was assassinated by his bodyguard for reasons still to be determined, and his son, Joseph Kabila, came to power instead. A year later, after long negotiations, a peace agreement was finally reached, leading to the formation of a transitional government composed of a president, Joseph Kabila, and four vice-presidents, each representing one of the main rebel movements and civil society. Clashes between the different factions continued, nevertheless, in many areas of the country, especially in the East. A new constitution was promulgated, and in 2006 Kabila junior, leader of the Parti du Peuple pour la Reconstruction et la Démocratie (PPRD), was elected president. The Congolese constitution stipulates a limit of two presidential terms, and Kabila was elected again in 2011. As the 2016 elections approached, however, the political landscape once more grew complicated.

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Joseph Kabila at the 60th UN General Assembly in September 2014.

Source: MONUSCO



Kabila and his entourage seem quite keen to remain in power at all costs and to do so they have engaged in a long series of manipulations and institutional distortions. At first, they tried to amend the constitution to avoid the two-mandate limit and thus renew Kabila's candidacy, but international pressure and internal opposition (mainly from the Catholic Church) drove the Government to desist. They next attempted to postpone the elections for as long as possible, a strategy that was backed by the Electoral Commission, which claimed that elections could not be held due to a lack of funds and the impossibility of setting up a proper census. These delays provoked a strong popular reaction, and numerous rallies in the main urban centres of the country have been violently suppressed by the police.

On 31 December 2016, the Government and the opposition finally signed the Accord de Saint-Sylvestre, an agreement that called for elections to be held within a year. However, the Government breached the agreement and managed once again to postpone the elections. In the absence of the scheduling of official elections, the Constitutional Court declared Kabila's ongoing presidency legitimate, but international pressure forced the Government to resume the negotiation and reach agreement with the opposition, finally setting the election day as 23 December 2018.

In August 2018, Kabila withdrew from the presidential race, while the ruling party, the PPRD, launched the candidacy of Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary, Minister of the Interior in the DRC, arguably Kabila's straw man. Yet Moïse Katumbi, former Governor of South Kivu and currently one of the main leaders of the opposition, has been excluded from the electoral race after the General Court issued an international arrest warrant against him, who has been accused of breaching national security. In addition to this, the opposition now seems unable to identify a single suitable candidate: in November, main opposition leaders such as Felix Tshisekedi, Jean-Pierre Bemba and Vital Kamerhe met in Geneva to appoint Martin Fayulu, leader of the party Engagement pour la Citoyenneté et le Développement, as their candidate; a few weeks later, both Tshisekedi and Kamerhe backed down, denying the agreement and claiming that Fayulu does not align with their electoral bases. All this only favours the government in power and Kabila's strategy, providing Kabila with the opportunity to

continue to exercise power behind the scenes and run for the 2023 elections.

Meanwhile, the uncertainty is exacerbating existing conflict dynamics in the country. In 2016, the Kasai province witnessed the outbreak of a rebellion led by Jean-Pierre Mpandi, a local leader opposed to the Kinshasa government, which failed to recognize him as a traditional leader. The harsh reaction of the central government and the military intervention in the region resulted in thousands of refugees flooding into Angola. Despite the turmoil in Kasai, the greater risk of conflict comes from the eastern regions, most notably North Kivu and South Kivu. There, political uncertainty favours the proliferation of armed groups in a context of fragmentation and fluid alliances. In the area surrounding Beni, a town in North Kivu, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) continues to rage. The ADF is a rebel movement born in Uganda, in the Rwenzori region, and it moved to the Congo after being severely defeated by the Ugandan army. The ADF is responsible for numerous massacres and there is now deep suspicion

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that neighbouring countries may make use of the group to destabilize the region. On 14 November 2018, seven peacekeepers from MONUSCO, the UN peace operation in the DRC, were killed by the ADF in Beni, where health institutions are already struggling to contain yet another Ebola epidemic.

In the days before the vote, the political climate in the DRC is not promising. The Electoral Commission has decided to use electronic voting machines, a choice strongly contested by the opposition, which is concerned about the use of this technology as it has never been tested in the country and might encourage fraud. The challenges the Congo is currently facing are enormous: widespread poverty, a corrupt and inefficient state apparatus, and widespread violence and conflict. The elections represent a crossroads: they might bring some sort of stability, essential for rebuilding the country, or they might exacerbate the existing conflict dynamics, plunging the country back into civil war.



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