



Kabila after Five Years: A Personal Retrospective

November 8, 2011

With the Congolese elections just three weeks away our researcher in Goma, Fidel Bafilemba, considers President Kabila's tenure and what the future may hold for the Congo.

For incumbent politicians, elections are often referendums on their past performance in office. Issues such as service delivery, stability, and economic development are in the forefront of voters' minds. Despite setbacks, criticism, and conspiracy theories, Congolese authorities have insisted that on November 28, 2011 voters will go to the polls to cast their ballots for president. Delays in printing candidates and voters lists, mapping polling stations, and shipping ballot boxes and other electoral materials are a few of reasons why a coalition of local and international human rights organizations have urged a postponement. However, the chairman of the Congolese Independent Electoral Commission chairman, known by its French acronym CENI, Pastor Ngoy Mulunda has repeatedly refuted the idea that holding presidential elections on time was impossible. As it stands, the Congolese people are only three weeks away from casting their ballots. A central theme in this electoral contest will be a consideration of Kabila's tenure and whether the powerful incumbent will allow campaigning and voting to proceed in a free, fair, and transparent manner.

This will be only the second presidential election by universal suffrage since the Congo's independence from Belgium in 1960. In 2006, five years after taking power following the assassination of his father, President Laurent-Désiré Kabila, in early 2001, Joseph Kabila became president in an electoral process deemed free and fair by the international community.

Upon taking office Kabila outlined a five-point plan to develop his country, an African giant that has been plagued by cyclical wars, rampant plundering, and corruption for much of its history. The five challenges he planned to tackle during his term in office were rebuilding the dilapidated national road infrastructure, bringing accessible healthcare and education to the majority of Congolese, providing safe housing, establishing functioning water and electricity delivery systems, and creating job opportunities. His broadly appealing, if vague, plan aroused many expectations among the Congolese electorate. But the question remains: With the presidential contest weeks away, how successful has Kabila's incumbent government been in achieving these broad development goals?

Congo's Paradox

The Congo is endowed with amazing natural resource wealth. It is the world's largest cobalt producer, third largest producer of industrial diamonds, fifth largest producer of copper, and is home to staggering reserves of uranium, oil, gold, tantalum, tungsten, niobium, and zinc. Beyond mineral resources, Congo

contains vast amounts of other resources including the continent's largest rainforests and ample amount of arable land. Congo's agriculture sector has the potential to feed 2 billion people—nearly a third of the world's population—according to Jacques Diouf, former general director of the Food and Agriculture Organization in Congo.ⁱ

Yet the Congo is a paradox. Despite the country's wealth in fertile land and vast mineral reserves, the population continues to suffer. According to an International Rescue Committee mortality survey in 2007, 5.4 million Congolese have died of treatable diseases.ⁱⁱ Poor water sanitation has made cholera endemic and widespread especially in urban areas like the capital, Kinshasa. Educational services, like healthcare, are lacking. Public school teachers frequently go on strike because of the government's inability to pay their salaries. The government is also incapable of implementing the constitutional provision that mandates free primary and high school education for all students. Additionally, large swaths of the eastern region are plagued by violence and continue to be overrun with armed forces.

Kabila himself made a harsh assessment of the progress of his development plan, stating during his last speech to the nation in December 2010, "Water and power cuts are people's daily lot. For 40 years, forests have swallowed 149,000 kilometers of roads Congo inherited from the Belgians." He added, "Another Congo is possible with different politics."ⁱⁱⁱ

Kabila's Politics – Different in word and deed

But what kind of politics has Kabila brought to the Congo?

Lacking any national constituency of his own when he succeeded his father in 2001, Kabila relied on support from the international community to shore up his powerbase. He easily wooed the inhabitants of the Elysees Palace and the White House on his presidential visits, due in part to his swift reversal of his father's policies. His outward cooperation with Western allies, however, belied drastic steps taken internally to consolidate his control. Three months after his swearing in, Kabila dramatically dismissed his entire cabinet, including allies who supported his ascension to the presidency in the wake of his father's assassination. In their place he appointed young Congolese technocrats. In reality, however, the country was ruled by Kabila and his small coterie of confidantes, the most remarkable of which, Augustin Katumba Mwanke, is known in diplomatic circles as the "Dick Cheney of the Congo." Under Kabila, Mwanke was given control of Congolese state assets including major diamond and copper concessions, steel mills, coffee plantations, and the national water and electricity companies. He was named by the U.N. Group of Experts as a key player in the continued plunder of the Congo's resources.

Despite the pervasive exploitation of the Congo's public assets, Kabila was praised for his ability to unify many competing political factions. Even though his power-sharing approach required rampant patronage and corruption, his reward for increased stability was a victory with 58 percent of the national vote in the 2006 election. He rhetorically connected the Congo's tenuous peace to his successful election. In the war-ravaged east, Kabila was elected largely on his promises to bring an end to conflict in the region.

However, sustainable peace cannot come from promises alone. Meaningful human security, civilian protection, and state autonomy depend primarily on security sector reform. In the Congo this requires genuine disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of irregular forces, the professionalization of the military, including establishment of military academies and systematic training, construction of adequate barracks, provision of proper clothing and equipment, and regular pay. Without these elements, armed forces in the east will not end their predation on the civilian population. Yet, for all of Kabila's years in power, and in spite of millions in donor aid supporting Congolese security sector reform, the various makeshift programs to integrate armed groups have largely failed. The Congolese military and irregular forces retain a perverse web of alliances and prevent a lasting peace in the east.

Kabila's Electoral Calculus

It seems Kabila has recognized the shortcomings of his administration and has moved to leverage his considerable political influence in the upcoming elections. As noted in the blog post, "[Controversial Constitution Review a Bellwether for More Disarray in Congo?](#)"^{iv} Kabila's controversial move to unilaterally alter the constitution marked the start of a tumultuous period in Congolese politics. His revisions have scrapped a multi-round run-off system in favor of one round of voting—potentially resulting in a president elected without a majority of votes. Kabila's move was one of political expediency. After years of consuming the country's assets while providing almost nothing to the people in return, his national image has been severely undermined. Under the old system this decline in popularity, along with significant defections of former allies to the opposition, left him with grim prospects of re-election. However, without a run-off system he may well be able to eke out a win by earning a plurality of votes. According to former North Kivu civil society chairman Jason Luneno, now opposition candidate Vital Kamerhe's campaign manager for the province, the president's coalition has requisitioned the entire Congolese air fleet in a bid to obstruct his challengers' ability to ship their campaign materials throughout the country.

Beyond electoral maneuvering, officers in the various militias and army regiments active in eastern Congo have expressed during interviews with Enough their willingness to use force to keep Kabila in power if the elections do not go in his favor. Like in the case of now-deposed Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo, the whispers of armed opposition to electoral results pervade the regions of the east. It is possible, regardless of the result, that the elections will stoke the embers of conflict in the country.

In all cases, given the current fragility of the political situation, post-electoral turmoil may seem unavoidable. The U.S. government, international community, and human rights groups have a duty to keep pressing for fair and transparent presidential elections. They must call on CENI and the Independent Broadcasting Authority to act impartially towards all parties and to allow opposition to share fully in the election processing centers. They must demand that all presidential contenders accept the election results without violence or incident. The work of MONUSCO in supporting and monitoring the process and in protecting civilians at a potentially volatile moment will also be vital to a successful election. Importantly, Kabila should welcome the elections as the legitimate voice of the Congolese people and allow the vote to proceed in a peaceful and transparent manner, regardless of the potential outcome.

ⁱ RDC-Humanitaire, Visite en République Démocratique du Congo du Directeur Général de la FAO. August 9, 2011. Accessed at: http://www.rdc-humanitaire.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1207:visite-en-republique-democratique-du-congo-du-directeur-general-de-la-fao&catid=18:communiqués-de-presse&Itemid=111

ⁱⁱ International Rescue Committee, Congolese Mortality Survey 2007. August 2007. Accessed at: <http://www.rescue.org/resource-file/irc-congo-mortality-survey-2007>

ⁱⁱⁱ From President Kabila's Speech on the 50th Anniversary of Congolese Independence. June 2010.

^{iv} Bafilemba, Fidel, CONTROVERSIAL CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW A BELLWETHER FOR MORE DISARRAY IN CONGO? The Enough Project, January 18, 2011. Accessed at: <http://www.enoughproject.org/blogs/controversial-constitutional-review-bellwether-more-disarray-congo>