

Congolese Braced for More Trouble

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There are widespread fears that the eventual loser in the presidential race will revert to violence. At the end of the last millennium, the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC, truly seemed to be, in Joseph Conrad's words, Africa's "Heart of Darkness".

The vast country, at the centre of the continent, sprawling across the equator and along and around the 4,400 kilometre-long Congo River and its innumerable tributaries, was embroiled in brutal civil wars and had been invaded by various African neighbours intent on exploiting DRC's immense mineral wealth.

It is evident that if the continent as a whole was to prosper, then this ailing heart of Africa required resuscitation and large-scale repair.

The first pulses of new lifeblood began to flow with the 2003 signing of the transitional peace deal the Global and All-Inclusive Agreement, largely brokered by South Africa, between the government of incumbent president Joseph Kabila and rebel factions in various parts of the country.

Despite periodic heart scares in the form of rebel insurrections and ethnic-linked violence during the past three years, the DRC, with military and political support from the international community, made history in July this year when its first national elections in 46 years were pronounced to be generally free and fair.

But the entrenchment of decades of violence as the favourite method of the Congolese for settling disputes was revealed when Kabila failed to secure an outright majority in the first round of voting.

Disgruntled supporters incited riots in which between 20 and 40 people were killed in the Congolese capital, Kinshasa. Isolated violence during the second round at the end of October forced two repeat votes during early November, in Ituri province - the focus of the historic first case of war crimes to be brought before the fledgling International Criminal Court in The Netherlands - and in the northwestern Equateur province.

The wanton destruction of voting stations in these areas indicates the fragility of the situation and there are widespread fears that the eventual loser in the presidential race will revert to violence.

The final result of the second round ballot between Kabila and challenger Jean-Pierre Bemba is expected only in late November. The result is likely to be quite close, for a variety of reasons. Torrential rains on election day on October 29 and during the previous night resulted in low voter turnout in some parts of the country. A smaller turnout in Kinshasa may favour Kabila, since the capital is regarded as a Bemba stronghold together with most of the western provinces. But turnout has also been low in the Swahili-speaking eastern parts of the country, where Kabila enjoys massive support.

The way more than thirty per cent of the population who voted for other candidates in the first round now recast their ballots, especially in the two south-central Kasai provinces, will probably be the deciding factor in who becomes the president of the newly and truly Democratic Republic of Congo.

“The first time round, in the two Kasai provinces, about 50 per cent of the population stayed away from the polls because they support Etienne Tshisekedi (a popular politician who boycotted the election),” Moemesi Kepadisa, who traveled in the Congo as a member of the South African election observer team, told IWPR. Kepadisa said there was a much higher turnout in Kasai in the second round, with many people telling him, “We are going to the elections to vote against Kabila.”

Although Tshisekedi has refused to endorse either candidate, Oscar Kashala, who is widely regarded as Tshisekedi’s heir, has supported Bemba and taken many voters with him. First-round contenders Antoine Gizenga and Joseph Mobutu Nzanga have thrown their weight behind Kabila, but they have not managed to swing their support base into the Kabila camp. Nzanga’s supporters especially are mainly from the northern Equateur region, a known Bemba stronghold.

A Bemba victory would create profound legal, political and moral dilemmas in The Hague at the headquarters of the ICC, which is at the early stages of a preliminary investigation into war crimes alleged to have been committed by Bemba and others in the DRC’s northern neighbour, the Central African Republic.

Kinshasa remains on edge and apprehension that a sore loser will return to bloodshed is palpable among the plush river-facing homes where both Kabila and Bemba as well as many diplomats live. Residents witnessed armed combat between Kabila and Bemba supporters in August and saw Bemba’s helicopter reduced to a pile of scrap-metal.

Supporters of both contestants have already claimed victory. Apollinaire Malu Malu, who heads the DRC’s electoral commission, warned that “false and premature statements” would “create a climate of useless and dangerous tension”.

At stake is control of the country’s huge mineral riches, including diamonds, gold, copper, coltan, cobalt, bauxite and potential oil fields. French and US support of the corrupt and oppressive regime of Mobutu Sese Seko in the Cold War era facilitated large shipments of arms into the country. This was followed by the provision of rear-bases and weapons to Congolese rebels by neighbouring states, notably Rwanda and Uganda, intent on looting the country’s resources. An estimated four million people have died in the Congo’s varied conflicts since 1999 and some two million have become internal or external refugees.

Though the Congolese people are weary of conflict, their leaders have failed to fully honour disarmament provisions in the transitional peace agreement. Various factions, including the Kabila and Bemba camps, have retained much of their military capacity and even re-armed, despite the presence of the largest United Nations’ peacekeeping force in the world.

While Kinshasa is ostensibly a demilitarised zone, Dr John Stremmler, of the Atlanta-based Carter Centre for human rights election observation team, noted that “Bemba has been moving arms all around Kinshasa over the past few weeks ... But senior diplomats believe that he is not about to do a putsch”. Rather, the argument goes, Bemba believes that if he does win the election he may need to restrain Kabila’s supporters, especially among the so-called Republican Guard who were involved in the August violence.

Some analysts believe that it was only the presence of additional European Union forces, EUFOR, bolstering UN troops in Kinshasa that averted a messier bloodbath during the August unrest. Dr Chris Fomunyoh, of the Washington-based National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, warned that the proposed pullout of EUFOR at the end of November may herald a return to violence on the part of the loser.

“The loser could choose to be magnanimous or he could wait until the end of the month and exploit the security vacuum that EUFOR’s departure will leave,” he said.

Stremlau is more optimistic, though he conceded that both Kabila and Bemba have blood on their hands. “It is the Congolese people’s choice, and if the elections are free and fair, then neither Bemba nor Kabila can afford a return to zero-sum politics,” he said. He pointed out that the interim constitution makes provision for the provinces to keep some of their revenues: therefore whichever candidate loses will have control of several provinces, and with the help of the international community a government of national unity can and should be formed.

Despite the constitutional provisions, ordinary Congolese place little faith in the power of the provinces and the role of provincial governors. “People we spoke to felt that most of the candidates in the elections were shady characters,” said Kepadisa. “They see the provincial governor as a tool of national government.”

Even though the governors are elected, people perceive that they will be dependent on Kinshasa for funds and their experience of politicians at national level has been that they are incorrigibly corrupt people who make little attempt to ensure that development occurs at provincial and local levels. Indeed, considering that the DRC is comparable in size to Western Europe, it has a mere 300 kilometres of tarred roads. Kepadisa notes, “To get to some areas, we had to literally drive through dongas [chasms] passing as roads.”

If Kabila retains the presidency, he could follow on his record of 2003 when he agreed to appoint four deputies from among the rebel leaders. By inviting Bemba into a unity government, he would earn global cooperation and goodwill similar to that showered upon post-apartheid South Africa.

Similarly, if Bemba becomes president, he could choose to be magnanimous and create an elder statesman role for Kabila, given the latter’s contribution to ending the civil war. This presupposes that both Kabila and Bemba can restrain the extremist elements among their supporters and that the 35-year-old Kabila, having tasted the power of the top job, has the maturity to concede defeat gracefully.

Even if Kabila does lose, his party already has a parliamentary majority and has formed a sufficiently strong alliance to allow it to appoint the prime minister, who will appoint the cabinet, but who will be second in power to the president.

Both contenders are relatively young and will have the opportunity to contest future elections in the event that they lose. There is of course the danger that if the country is split into two, along an east-west axis, one region will choose to secede, and the danger that this could spark yet another Congo conflict is very real.

Manipulation within the neighbourhood is another potential threat, with reports that Angolan troops have massed on the Congolese border in an implicit threat to intervene in the event that its ally, Kabila, loses. Uganda’s president Yoweri Museveni, who has supported and provisioned Bemba, cannot be left out of the equation. Nor should Rwandese president Paul Kagame, who has backed various factions and militias

It is high time that the Congolese people, who - because of the historic politics of racial colonial superiority and naked post-colonial greed - have had little opportunity to develop their country or their human potential, be allowed to choose to progress. Peaceful elections are only the beginning. With the help of the international community, the elections must be reinforced and the new government must be fast-tracked into the institutional mechanics of governance, a weighty but not impossible task.

Though the heart of Africa has been resuscitated, it is weak and total recovery will be slow and painstaking. But a healthy Congo, pulsating with the lifeblood of commerce and industry, would, in the long term, benefit the whole continent and the rest of the globe. It is up to the world to apply sufficient political pressure to ensure that a return to violence becomes an ever-receding possibility in the DRC.

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