

DRC Youth Under Spotlight as Elections Loom

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Young people could have a significant influence on upcoming polls – both negative and positive.

As the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC, prepares for presidential elections scheduled for the end of November, signs of the vulnerability and maturity of politically-active youth, a key section of the Congolese electorate, has been evident across the country.

The electoral campaign season is set to get underway on October 28, yet the town of Lubumbashi in Katanga province has already experienced clashes between youth supporters of rival parties – with political leaders accused of exploiting them to incite violence.

Meanwhile, in the city of Goma in North Kivu province, young activists who are fed up with discredited mainstream parties are putting themselves forward as electoral candidates – seen as a willingness to break with the political cynicism of the past and advance the interest of the electorate.

Youngsters make up the largest percentage of the Congolese electorate. And given the high levels of unemployment among what is an increasingly urbanised section of society, the youth are a significant focus for political campaigns.

While September was largely peaceful in Lubumbashi, earlier this year the town witnessed fighting between young supporters of the incumbent governor of Katanga, Moïse Katumbi Chapwe, and those of rival party, Solidarité Congolaise pour la Démocratie, SCODE.

Young people from the ruling Parti du Peuple pour la Reconstruction et la Démocratie, PPRD, attacked the TV channel belonging to SCODE president, Jean Claude Muyambo. Muyambo's house was also ransacked and its windows broken.

"The people who attacked us are the ones supporting Moïse Katumbi. They are known by everyone, we call them the '100 per cent'," Oderick Kabwita, a young SCODE supporter said. "They remain unpunished because they are close to Katanga's governor. We are in a time of democracy; everybody should be able to speak freely."

The so-called 100 per cent are a group who provide security to PPRD leaders on official public engagements.

Meanwhile, young supporters of the PPRD deny any wrongdoing.

"Muyambo exaggerated. He is the one who provoked us," said a young man from the 100 per cent group who spoke to IWPR on condition of anonymity. "If someone criticises the governor Moïse, we are the ones being despised."

A second bout of violence broke out during a visit to Lubumbashi in August by the leader of the Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social, UDPS, Etienne Tshisekedi.

Young supporters of the Union Nationale des Fédéralistes du Congo, UNAFEC, attacked Tshisekedi's supporters, throwing stones at cars and injuring a few dozen UPDS supporters.

The national president of the UNAFEC, Antoine Kyungu, has denied that his party was behind the attack.

In contrast to the violence of Lubumbashi, in Goma, eastern DRC, politically-active youth have taken a more responsible path, choosing to run for election in the upcoming polls. They say they no longer want to be manipulated by the political elite that has represented them since 2006 – and they see a chance to revolutionise the country's politics.

"It is not enough to elect leaders, to participate in public life," Manegabe Bienfait, one of the young candidates, explained. "It is also interesting to be elected and to add one's contribution to the building of this country. In 2006, we were only voters. So we thought we could run as candidates for legislative elections, in order that our presence here with the big [candidates] could change things in the DRC."

Many young people from Goma are disillusioned by the lack of effort made by those in power to improve social conditions, particularly levels of education and employment, in DRC.

Barolere Styves, who is studying law in Goma, is also running as a candidate in the legislative elections. He says that the difficulties that Congo is currently going through are directly linked to its leaders. Styves believes the Congolese population is not taking responsibility for itself at a political level and needs to

change its way of thinking.

“What motivates me the most is the desire to give new values to my Congolese colleagues to take our country away from crisis,” Styves said.

Commenting on the hostilities and tense atmosphere in Lubumbashi, some there blame the political elite for the actions of the young.

“It's true that young people in political parties use violence. But they are just carrying out the orders of leadership,” said a second young man involved in recent violence in the city who spoke anonymously to IWPR.

“Young members of a political party do not get up one morning and attack members of another party; the leader must ask them to commit such an act. For me, it is not so much the young that should be criticised, but rather the political leaders who are often seen as the basis for outbreaks of violence.”

Electoral violence in Lubumbashi can be said to be symptomatic of how parties have approached elections in Katanga province since the beginning of the democratic era in the mid-1990s.

In 2006, Lubumbashi witnessed tense stand-offs between youth groups from various parties during the presidential run-off between President Joseph Kabila and his rival Jean-Pierre Bemba.

“The important thing to realise about Lubumbashi is that there is a long tradition of youth groups, even youth militias, mobilising in an electoral period,” Jason Stearns, an analyst on Congo who writes the blog Congo Siasa, said. “I think in part [we are seeing the current violence] because Lubumbashi has a tradition of that and youth groups follow that kind of model.”

Although campaigning has not started yet, posters of Kabila are everywhere in the town and PRDP youth are taking to the streets in their party colours.

According to international sources who spoke to IWPR, youth violence in the capital, Kinshasa, has ratcheted up in recent weeks. Political parties are mobilising youth through political affiliations with the city's sports clubs. Others actually hire youngsters as mercenaries – known as kalunas – who carry out violence against political opponents.

“The various parties are trying to mobilise this youth – many of whom will vote for the first time in the coming elections – through the Lubumbashi model, the youth wings that they attach to their parties,” Stearns said.

According to some local commentators, the tense situation in Lubumbashi does not necessarily stem from young people strongly following a particular political ideology but rather is often a result of them having joined political parties through tribal associations.

As a result, disputes are resolved through violence rather than an engagement in meaningful debate.

“We have a problem in our country,” local political analyst Jérôme Mutonkole explained. “Young people do not join political parties because of their belief in the ideology but because they are fanatics of political leaders. Our political parties can be mistaken for tribal associations, behind each political leader there are youngsters from their tribe. It has become a tribal war instead of a war of ideas.”

However, others see the issue as more complex. While recognising that there are tribal elements to politics in Lubumbashi, Stearns says deep tribal tensions also exist in Goma where more peaceful patterns of political mobilisation have emerged.

“I'm not sure it is tribalism necessarily,” Stearns said. “I don't think that is the reason you have one kind of mobilisation in one city and in another you have another.”

Stearns points out developments in Goma since 2006 have led to a different political dynamic from that which exists in Lubumbashi.

“Various parties that supported [incumbent president] Kabila in the 2006 elections have lost a lot of credibility in the east, including in Goma,” Stearns said. “That has opened a space for youth groups to be active as well. So those youth groups are not necessarily captured by the same sort of party wings as they are in Lubumbashi and there may be more space for them to engage in more peaceful means of democratic expression.”

In terms of the violence itself, observers say the fierce nature of the political campaigns in the DRC has been allowed to persist because the perpetrators have not been held to account.

“The solution I can offer is to punish perpetrators of violence,” Rodrigue Katulo, a human rights activist in Lubumbashi, said. “Impunity encourages these young people to commit such acts. We never heard that

those who had attacked politicians were arrested or tried.”

The Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC, in Katanga has condemned the political violence in Lubumbashi.

The provincial coordinator, Eddy Mutomb, told IWPR that those responsible for the political violence will be brought to justice.

“We are doing everything to ensure peaceful elections, which is why INEC has signed a code of conduct with all the political parties,” Mutomb said. “Parties pledged to respect it. Those who violate it will be known to everyone as the party that made the mess and the law will take care of them.”

Simon Jennings IWPR’s Africa editor contributed to this report.

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