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## Countdown for Elections: A Tightrope Walk for the DRC?

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Officially announced for November 28, 2011, the countdown for elections and its related stress are already underway in the DRC. The recent experience of the Ivory Coast and the ongoing accusations against how the Kabila government is managing the electoral process, warn of the impact of elections on a still fragile DRC. Although elections are not likely to change anything for the Congolese people, they put the DRC's peace process on a tightrope walk and with that, they also expose the government's and the international community's undone housework. The stakes are very high. The government has to prove its capacity to conduct free and fair elections; that the country does not descend into conflict and that its demands for the UN mission in Congo (MONUSCO) to retreat are well founded. For the international community, its golden formula of statebuilding and democratisation as a necessary strategy for peace needs to pay off, though yet one more extension (last June 30<sup>th</sup>) after 10 years of the mission puts this into question. It is thus the legitimacy of the process itself and the image of the government and the international community that is more at stake than the future of the DRC. Elections could be the last straw, but even if the process is celebrated in calm and with a relative image of legitimacy, the underlying fragility of the DRC needs to be taken seriously and certain strategies need to be revised.



It is precisely this fragile context that has made the international community be timid about supporting the elections. The International Crisis Group demanded the postponing of the elections in order to guarantee fair and free elections and a transparent process. According to the research conducted by this NGO, free and fair elections will only be seen as legitimate if they are postponed in order to allow the completion of the registry, the financial support to reach the electoral commission and for the opposition to reorganise itself.

However, the postponing of elections seems to be less and less of an option. The timid support of the international organisations, fearful of being attached to a fraudulent electoral process, has turned in the last few weeks, into a strong push to go ahead with the calendar proposed by the government, at least on paper.

MONUSCO's recently renewed mandate is committed to providing logistical support and to guard the electoral process from possible violence. However, this will mean possible boosting of the mission's military and police, which was recently reduced. As noted by the Secretary General in his last report, this could hinder the capacity of a reaction to a possible descent into violence. The EU, on its part, has publicly supported the government for the realisation of elections and has already committed funding to assist with electoral logistics and an electoral observation mission. However, behind closed doors, other things are being said. While the Norwegian government is still astounded at having two of its citizens condemned to indefinite prison sentences because of their involvement in arms trafficking; the French, the English and the Belgians, for instance, defend different views as to whether they want to be seen to support a democratic process or a corrupt government organising flawed elections. The United States has already committed \$11 million to organise civic education campaigns around elections and a further \$1.5 million for an independent electoral observation mission.



This uneven support gives evidence of Kabila's relative ambivalent position. Kabila has disappointed many internationally and internally, displaying authoritarian manners and lack of unifying capacity, but he stands against a disorganised opposition and has been carrying out a successful macro-economic programme that suits major players. Congo has recorded a continuous 7% growth for the last few years, has grown as an important exporter of minerals, timber, electricity and water and it is an increasingly attractive country for investment where inflation and taxes are being brought down. Congo seems to please everyone, signing billion-dollar agreements with China and getting IMF/WB debt-relief last year. Further, Kabila's

rapprochement with neighbours, especially Rwanda, also makes him a good candidate to continue with certain regional policies, even at the cost of strong internal critiques (those who see the strong neighbours as a major push behind the continuation of war).



However, Kabila does not seem fully confident and is trying to control the process. There have been sudden changes in the mode of scrutiny and the second round of presidential elections was cancelled; a PPRD (Kabila's party) voter is now president of the National Independent Electoral Commission and the registration process is delayed yet again. Repression is high against journalists and human rights activists. These elements jeopardise the government's pretensions of a democratic image and they come to add to an already deteriorated image.

Last-minute, half-hearted efforts are unlikely to help. Last year's assassination of human rights activist Floribert Chebeya and his driver brought the situation of human rights defenders in the DRC to the international spotlight. Now that

elections are close, the government has condemned four policemen to death and one to life sentence for these killings. A judicial process that, as expected, does not change the broader framework of repression and impunity that human rights defenders endure. Repression to journalists has intensified in the last few months according to several journalists and the last UN Secretary General's report. Likewise, probably because of elections, a new law obliges the government to publish all its mining, forestry and petrol contracts. However, nothing is said about contracts already signed, or the limits of effective implementation.

Even then, Kabila is still well positioned. Politicians in general hold a really bad reputation amongst a population that takes the biggest toll from ongoing violence and poverty. The opposition is badly organised and neither the two biggest opposition candidates Etienne Tshisekedi (UPDS) nor Vital Khamerhe (UNC) enjoy the popular support they used to. Bemba, a strong opposition candidate that managed to almost win elections in 2006 (some say he actually won them) and that caused real fighting in Kinshasa, is still holding cause in the ICC. Even if he was released, he would not have time to comply with the requirements the new electoral law mandates. These requirements include for instance that candidates attach a photocopy of their electoral card, which can only be obtained personally and physically upon inscription in an electoral enrolment office, to take fingerprints and photos, and all this before the end of July. This lack of organisation might be why the opposition has been not been playing completely clean either. According to a member of the civil society in Bukavu, members of the main political parties are convincing people to register in the circumscription they are running so that they can vote for them.

Thus for the population at the grassroots, elections are expected not with a sense of participating in the future of the country, but rather with a sense that all there is for them is more insecurity and repression. According to the President of local human

rights monitoring organisation, Solidarité de Volontaires pour l'Humanité, Evariste Mfaume, the attacks against certain civil society members linked to elections 'will increase as elections come closer and it is for that reason that they that local organisations in general are demanding international NGOs to lobby and put pressure internationally so that there is effective protection and monitoring in favour of democracy.' On June 30, the day of Congo's independence anniversary, the civil society of Bukavu decided to boycott the celebrations and do a sit-in dressed in black as a mourning to protest against increased insecurity.



Whether this insecurity tilts the balance towards the explosion of an ongoing conflict or whether it maintains it as is will be a matter of how well organised they are and how good the systems of prevention and monitoring in place are.

A descent into a full-on conflict, although unlikely, would put both the national and international actors on the spot-light. The continuation of foreign armed groups in the territory, of the arms trafficking, of a conflict whose major target is the population, of poverty, and the incapacity to delink the exploitation of natural resources with the armed groups and sectors of the military is the real tightrope walk for Congo. If elections in the future are to represent a substantial democratic advancement in the reconstruction and peace building process and not just a self-serving show for the government and international donors, putting the Congo on stable ground and out of the tightrope should be the homework to take from this process for both the government and the international actors involved.

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