

Contesting 'Le Glissement': Analysis of Election Gridlocks and Constitutional Coup in DRC

Buhendwa Mema discusses the continuing political deadlock in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and gives an insight into how President Kabila's regime has capitalised on a fragmented opposition to prolong its administration.

The Democratic Republic of Congo, a country known for its natural resource paradox with untapped raw mineral ores worth \$24 trillion and an impoverished population is entering a new vicious cycle of conflict and anarchy. Hope for a peaceful democratic transition continues to dwindle as President Kabila refuses to cede power.

While the DRC has enjoyed relative peace and political stability in the last decade, the government's failure to organise elections has resulted in deteriorating security in the already fragile state. Quiet revolution is growing among the commoners: From the [Kamwina Nsampu revolt](#) in Southern DRC in the villages of Central Kasai, to the [Bundu dia Congo's](#) movement in Kongo Central in western DRC, there is a clamour for regime change.



Will President Kabila stay or go?

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Little was known of the Kamwina Nsampu rebellion until the circulation of a video on social media showing the DRC armed forces' brutal bloodshed and killings of Kamwina Nsampu rebels who are largely untrained civilians armed with spears and machetes. The rebellion gained international attention when [members of the United Nations Group of Experts in DRC, a Swedish and an American citizen were killed](#) while investigating the bloody uprising against Kabila's regime in Kasai-Central. Although the government has linked the killings of the UN officials to Kamwina Nsampu, the new waves of violence, revolts, protests, arrests, and killings demonstrates the disapproval of Congolese people of Kabila's constitutional coup and exposes the regime's desperation for survival. Several mass graves have been discovered in Kasai-Central, but it is suspicious for the DRC government to rebuff the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights call for investigations into the bloody abuses committed against civilians. Such hesitancy to allow reliable investigations into the killings against civilians in Central Kasai only exacerbates the regime's damaging human rights records.

Kabila's reluctance to cede power is further escalating violence in regions once perceived as peaceful. According to news reports, In Kongo Central Province in western DRC, Ne Muanda Nsemi, a parliamentarian and leader of Bundu dia Congo, a religious political movement had been [arrested](#) for calling for resistance and uprising against Kabila's regime following the delayed elections. Muanda Nsemi's activism gained global publicity when his followers [invaded and rescued him from Makala maximum Prison in Kinshasa](#). Even though elections should have been taken place in November 2016, Kabila has [strategically prolonged](#) his administration. His quest for a constitutional 'glissement' or slippage was tested long before the current election gridlock. In August 2016, the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) claimed that lack of finance as the reason why elections could not be held. While delivering his state of the nation address in December 2016, President Kabila ironically called for national dialogue on issues surrounding elections. The government pushed to pass a law that would require national census before holding elections. Given the financial pressures on the national government, organising the national census and elections simultaneously would be unviable. Nonetheless, while the government failed in its objective to pass the national census law, the CENI bizarrely [introduced a 16-month timetable](#) to revise voter register making the 2016 presidential elections infeasible.

Negotiation Gridlocks and Opposition Polarisation

Since then, a series of negotiations have taken place between Kabila's regime and the opposition coalition to ease the political tension. [The first agreement, l'Accord de la Cité de l'OUA, facilitated by Edem Kodjo](#), the ex-Togolese Prime Minister under the backing of the African Union, resulted into a power-sharing accord between the government and part of the opposition headed by Vital Kamerhe, the leader of the Union for the Congolese Nation (UNC). While the agreement called for blocking Kabila from seeking reelection, his appointment of Samy Badibanga, 'a rebel within the opposition' as prime minister split the opposition coalition, especially in the Union for Democracy and Social Change (UDPS) party. A second round of negotiations led by Congo's National Conference of Catholic Bishops (CENCO) produced another agreement on New Year's Eve of December 31, 2016. However, the implementation of the accord [stalled](#) due to disagreements over the control of the transitional government, especially the appointment of the prime minister. On April 7, 2017 President Kabila [created a storm in the opposition coalition when he named Bruno Tshibala, the former deputy secretary general of UDPS who had recently fallen out with his party, as prime minister](#). Bruno Tshibala, who has joined a dissident wing of the opposition coalition, was excluded from UDPS after he contested Félix Tshisekedi's appointment as the new leader of UDPS. While these negotiations have given a veneer of respectability to Kabila's constitutionally illegitimate government, they have damaged the public perception of the opposition as serious contenders. By rewarding opposition 'rebels' with ministerial posts, Kabila has restricted the amount of influence his rivals can exert at the heart of government.

Way Forward

As Kabila continues to execute a slippage towards a constitutional coup, rising public discontent over stalled political talks on elections and worsening economic difficulties is increasingly limiting the regime's control over the largely impoverished and frustrated population. Political stability in DRC is unattainable without economic rewards where political elites have failed to move from policies, planning, and strategies to actual implementation in order to transform the socio-economic conditions of the people.

The most effective way to avert instability and violence is to break the political negotiation gridlock. International players should intensify their diplomatic tools to pressure the political class to end the political polarisation and concentrate on organising elections with a specified tight timetable. Above all, the political elite should relinquish the politics of exclusion, which only benefits a tiny minority.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.