



Kabila's Strengths and Vulnerabilities as DRC Deadline Nears

Protests have been announced for December 19, the day President Joseph Kabila's mandate is supposed to end. What should we expect?

For many, December 19 should be the end of Kabila's second and last term in office. Opposition parties and civil society groups are invoking article 64 of the constitution, which places with the people the "duty" to defend the country against unconstitutional rule. Large demonstrations in January 2015 and this September revealed a popular mood against Kabila's attempts to amend the constitution, which would allow him to stay in power. Both series of protests were violently repressed and dozens killed. After September, demonstrations were banned and some organisers were arrested or prohibited from domestic travel. This repression has dampened popular mobilisation.

This reliance on security and intelligence will continue and pro-regime youth groups are being mobilised in Kinshasa. Without a consensual agreement on the date of elections and the transition period, the opposition is bound to call for protests: its credibility is at stake. So protests and violence are almost inevitable. But there are signs that repression has had an impact and December 19 may not be as explosive as some expect.

The ruling majority portrays the 19th as a "normal" day, noting the constitutional court ruled that the president will remain in office until his replacement is elected. While the court's independence is heavily contested, this

interpretation is an important underpinning of the AU-backed the October 18 agreement which put the new election dates in April 2018, leaving President Kabila with full powers.

What is your prognosis for violence and political instability over the coming year?

Even if the regime contains unrest in December, tension will remain high. The economic crisis will put more pressure on families. Increased numbers of people will question state institutions' legitimacy, so we can expect to see pockets of violence around the country gain ground. In North Kivu in the east, where the state is doing little to protect local communities, Mai Mai community defence militia are taking actions against predatory armed groups. While dispersed violence, however, is far from civil war, the regime could hunker down and survive, the more dangerous the outlook gets.

What drives President Kabila and the people around him to remain in power?

Congo has never known a peaceful democratic handover of power. Winner-takes-all politics, lack of transparency, violence, corruption and instability all mean a change at the top can have enormous consequences. So the status quo is preferable for the regime, unless change can be managed from within.

Kabila has no popular or regional political base, although he was once respected for having helped end the civil war. His entourage fears he would have little chance of winning an

election. And losing, in their eyes, means likely prosecution for corruption and human rights violations. The loser of the 2006 elections, Jean-Pierre Bemba, was prosecuted by the International Criminal Court.

What is the role of the opposition in the current crisis?

The main opposition is calling for Kabila to leave well before April 2018. But it has struggled to maintain unity. The current umbrella group, the Rassemblement, formed in June 2016, is led by UDPS leader Etienne Tshisekedi and includes the former governor of Katanga, Moïse Katumbi. It refused to participate in the AU mediated National Dialogue launched in September 2016. But other opposition figures, including Samy Badibanga (a dissident from the UDPS) did take part. Badibanga was appointed prime minister in November, a move probably calculated to further divide the opposition by tempting some into government. A limited mobilisation on December 19 risks weakening the opposition's credibility.

Youth groups, in particular Lutte pour le changement (Lucha), continue to play a prominent role, but have struggled to put down deeper roots. Targeted repression has hampered their development but contributed to their credibility.

There has been emphasis on the need for dialogue and inclusivity. Do attempts at mediation, such as the recent process managed by the Catholic Church, still stand a chance?

All actors agree on the need for dialogue. But when it comes to the details, agreement is rarely found. The Rassemblement refused to participate in the September dialogue which they saw as an attempt to legitimise the government's desire to stay in power. So the resulting agreement of October 18 has not been signed by the opposition - hence the new Catholic Church initiative.

This process is however also deadlocked. The church has now called for direct talks,

which the president has accepted in principle. So while agreement may be reached on second order issues such as political prisoners, positions on fundamentals are still far apart. The Rassemblement's view - that the president should remain for up to a year, but with limited power - is a more pragmatic position, but the regime feels under little pressure to make concessions.

How does political tension affect the country?

Tension is more apparent in big cities. People have used gatherings, such as football matches, to express their desire for political change. The regime has deployed police and the military to deter protest, or to counter it with violence.

As the regime focuses on maintaining power, the neutralisation of armed groups in the east has taken a back seat, thereby further weakening the government's legitimacy. This is mostly felt in Beni, North Kivu, where nearly 1000 have been killed since 2014. These killings have also eroded the credibility of the UN mission (Monusco).

The country's economic crisis could also have more impact on popular mobilisation. If the worsening situation triggers hunger riots, this will have a more unpredictable outcome than organised political protests.

What is the regional dimension of the DRC crisis?

The region is concerned about the security implications of the DRC's political crisis escalating. Immediate neighbours worry about refugees. The region and AU have both supported dialogue. Angola continues to support mediation. Regional organisations have accepted the October 18 agreement, but seemingly put little pressure on Kabila to step down. They show little faith in the opposition and support the status quo for now. The opposition, meanwhile, focuses its attention more on the EU and the US, regarded as defenders of democracy.

In the east, Rwanda and Uganda are not interfering as they once did, which led South Africa to intervene through the UN.

What has been the role of the international community and Monusco, the UN's largest peacekeeping mission?

The US and, to a lesser extent, the EU, pressured the government to organise elections within the constitutional timeframe. As this has had little effect, both have supported inclusive dialogue and called for elections in 2017. Unlike African powers, they have criticised the October 18 agreement, for delaying the electoral timetable into 2018. To increase pressure, the US has adopted targeted sanctions.

The EU has stated it is willing to follow suit. Sanctions have caused some unease within government, as has the increased recent publicity over corruption scandals. The direct political

impact has, however, been limited. Repression continues. This is a reminder of the decreasing influence of Western actors on the continent.

The UN mission and Special Representative have played a discrete role. Monusco and joint human rights office observers have publicised human rights abuses in Kinshasa and other cities, with some dissuasive impact. The South African-led military component, has expanded its presence in Kinshasa. But if urban violence breaks out, the UN mission will struggle to protect civilians.