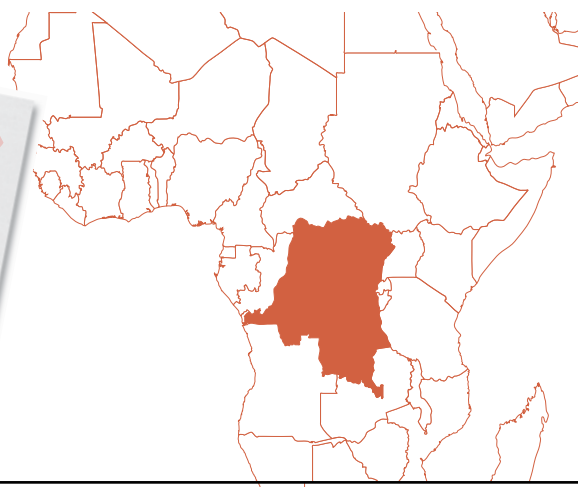


**Elections in
the Democratic
Republic of
Congo in 2006**



Introduction¹

In the wake of decades of authoritarian rule and protracted violent conflict, the DRC held its first multi-party elections in nearly forty years in 2006. Stemming from an inclusive political settlement that recognised the election process as the cornerstone for national democratisation, these elections have helped to bring peace to the DRC, as most of the contending military forces have withdrawn, laid down arms, or at least suspended fighting – some militants have even been weeded out entirely. More importantly, the discourse has shifted to view power as being won through political victories, rather than armed conflict. In sum, the elections have legitimated the government both internally and internationally, as well as unified like-minded political forces, helping the government deal with the main threat to peace and stability, the return of General Nkunda's Tutsi troops to the battlefield.

However, much remains to be improved in the country's movement toward democratic processes and institutions. Progress toward democratic politics is slow and uneven, particularly around political rights for minorities, free and fair media, the responsiveness and accountability of political leadership, and the rule of law within the country.

¹ This brief is adapted from 'Elections and Democratisation in the Democratic Republic of Congo' by Denis Kadima and David K. Leonard, with Anna Schmidt.

Background

After gaining independence in 1960, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC; formerly Zaire) began a stretch of instability and thirty years of authoritarian rule by Joseph Mobutu Sese Seko. In the early 1990s, the country experienced internal instability and the beginnings of a movement toward democratic politics. However, in May 1997 the consequences of the Rwandan genocide spilled over into the DRC and Laurent Kabila and his (primarily Rwandan) allies defeated Mobutu's undisciplined and poorly paid troops and installed Kabila in the presidency. When conflict developed among his allies, however, the country slipped into a nasty civil war involving neighbouring states and various internal factions.

After years of warfare, Kabila was assassinated in 2001 and replaced by his son, Joseph Kabila, who began to attempt reconciliation between the opposing sides. This led to the inter-Congolese dialogue in Sun City, South Africa, in 2002 and the Pretoria Accord signed by former belligerent parties, as well as the establishment of transitional institutions (such as a national assembly, senate, and a coalition government co-chaired by the president and four oppositional vice-presidents), ultimately leading to elections in 2006.

Elections

The 2006 elections consisted of both national and provincial elections in July and a presidential run-off in October. As a result, Joseph Kabila was announced the winner of the presidency with 58% of the vote, over Jean-Pierre Bemba's 42%. Kabila's supporting platform of political parties, the *Alliance de la Majorité Présidentielle* (AMP), also won the national assembly elections and the majorities in seven of eleven provincial assemblies, against Bemba's *Union Pour la Nation* (UN) alliance.

Although these elections were not without flaws, they were perceived to be acceptably fair and representative of the general will of the Congolese people, and to have met their major objectives of re-establishing legitimate government in the DRC and contributing to durable peace. *The Commission Electorale Indépendante* (CEI), a transitional institution created following agreements in 2002, handled them effectively, providing an important milestone in the peace process. The elections were effectively monitored in the face of massive logistical challenges, and the voting and counting processes were seen to be exemplary. The conflict management panels set up to handle election-related conflicts functioned efficiently and smoothly. Many disputes over the electoral processes were addressed through the CEI and the courts from the commencement of registration onward.

However, elections have to be understood within the wider context of the patron-client political ties which drive politics in the DRC. The lack of social security institutions leaves citizens dependent on their regional, social, religious, and ethnic communities and thus inclines voters to favour candidates sympathetic to their groups. Since the weak state cannot deliver social welfare goods, politicians fill this role, trickling the benefits of patronage down to the masses. Even if achievement-oriented, policy-based political competition might produce better results for the country as a whole, the individual politician, community, or voter sees patron-client ties as first-best, especially in rural areas.

Competing international power-holders are also key players in DRC's political process. Neighbours (Uganda, Angola, and primarily Rwanda) and members of the international community (USA, Belgium, China, MONUC) have diverse and often conflicting interests in the country, which sometimes put them in competition. This illustrates the potential fragility of domestic accountability in the face of fierce international interests.

International donor action and lessons learnt

The international community supported the electoral process in the DRC from the outset through bilateral and multilateral interventions. It is safe to say that the elections would not have nor could have taken place without this involvement. The financial, logistical, and security support provided by the international community were massive and ultimately successful. The United Nations peacekeeping mission charged with monitoring and stabilising the electoral process, MONUC, was the largest and most expensive ever undertaken by the UN.

Overall, international elections support – political, technical, and financial – was coordinated by MONUC. The international community also established a basket fund managed by the UNDP and contributed a total of roughly US \$267 million, with the United Kingdom providing 7.5% as the largest unilateral donor. The DRC itself provided US \$40 million, roughly one-tenth of the total cost of the elections, with MONUC contributing US \$103 million to the basket. MONUC itself has had an annual budget of approximately US \$1 billion and over 17,000 peacekeepers.

Despite tensions between different approaches and interests among donors, the various contributors developed a fluid but coherent approach to the elections, stemming from a strong consensus that the elections were too important to fail.

Donor support for security was critical to the success of the elections. MONUC provided security throughout all the phases of elections (pre-voting, voting and post-voting). For the presidential run-offs there was a European Union rapid response force (EUFOR) in Kinshasa. The DRC army and police would not have been reliable on their own although equipment and training provided by the international community to the police throughout the country significantly improved their operational capacity to provide security during the elections. Moreover, donor mediation was critical in de-escalating the crisis that occurred when the Congolese army attacked Bemba's residence in Kinshasa between the two rounds of the presidential election.

The international community provided support to the justice system for election disputes. Some argue that otherwise the courts would probably have failed, given the deterioration they had undergone in the Mobutu years. Further work to re-focus the judicial system on the substance of electoral complaints, away from narrow technical grounds as the deciding factor in resolving disputes, would allow the public to better understand and accept court decisions.

The international community also has coercive power beyond the borders of DRC. The DRC opposition leader's arrest by the International Criminal Court (ICC) and his indictment for crimes against humanity have been interpreted by his supporters as "this-is-what-happens-to-the-losers". As a result, politicians will use all the means at their disposal to ensure that they do not lose an election in future. Understanding and embedding this risk into international community scenario planning is crucial.

Looking ahead

After the successful general election of 2006 and indirect elections of senators and governors in 2007, all parties agreed that local elections, as part of the decentralisation process agreed in the peace deal, needed to be organised in order to ensure that the full electoral cycle was completed in the DRC. However, for a combination of political and technical reasons, local elections have been postponed until February 2011. Pressure from political parties and

technical issues recently led the CEI to change the voters' registration methodology, resulting in the exercise being far more costly and requiring more time.

Continued donor support in the DRC is vital for further progress in the peace process. This concerns not only funding to forthcoming elections, but also monitoring and acting on the risks associated with incumbency. As the democratic space in the DRC shrinks, international action may be necessary to preserve the neutrality and integrity of the nation's political and legal framework.

Civic and voter education should be prioritised well in advance of the forthcoming elections and continued through the full electoral cycle. This may help to curb disenchantment from democratic processes and politics. Moreover, donors need to continue MONUC's Radio OKAPI through 2011 and provide for the establishment of an equivalent programme thereafter, as its coverage and content is unparalleled. The loss of such a platform for informed discussion will shrink the DRC's political space. Efforts by the UK, France and Sweden to support a 5-year 'media for democracy and accountability' project will help develop diverse and professional media that will improve access to quality information with which ordinary people can hold decision-makers to account.

Popular impatience with elected officials has become pronounced due to growing poverty levels, corrupt public officials and their cronies, high salaries of politicians, continued violence in the east, the shrinking democratic space, widespread lack of service delivery (either by government or by patron), political assassinations, and blatant violations of human rights. Declining public trust in democratic institutions and processes has resulted from such absences of 'democracy dividends'. The problem arises in part due to inadequate pre-election civic and voter education.

When they happen, local elections may threaten to unseat traditional leaders such as chiefs and the lowest levels of Congolese bureaucracy, who have provided stability through years of civil war. Elsewhere in Africa, such a transition in the structure of authority and accountability has led to considerable violence and discontent. There is no question within the DRC or among international donors that such traditional power structures must be broken and reformed, but the immediate nature of such changes could pose the threat of conflict.

Sustainability of electoral processes over the medium to long term is likely to be problematic. For example, future MONUC support will be vastly scaled down and it is unclear whether or not the DRC will be able to meet the challenge of ensuring peaceful voting. It is now urgent for the DRC government to come up with objective responses to these challenges in order to facilitate the holding of local elections. Better interaction with the international community is required to come up with a joint decision on the way forward.