



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org

F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org

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Africa Programme Paper

Elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Local Matters

Ben Shepherd

Associate Fellow, Africa Programme, Chatham House

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A Different Election

Presidential and National Assembly elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) took place on November 28 2011. Attention from the outside world has been muted, in marked contrast to the 2006 polls, which were conducted in the eye of a storm of international activity. In part this is due to changed circumstances; the 2006 elections marked the formal end of a three year post-conflict transition in the DRC, after a decade of violence. Rival political camps retained significant military capacity, in Kinshasa and elsewhere, and the risk of slipping back into war was very real. The relatively peaceful 2006 process is partly attributable to intensive international support, including large-scale investment in training Congolese observers and police, voter education and logistical assistance to the polls, as well as proactive UN deployments, supported by an EU military mission.

The five years since have seen the DRC return to relative peace; the final remnants of the war-time belligerents have largely melted away, and even the eastern Kivu Provinces have achieved an uneasy equilibrium, despite on-going horrendous human rights abuses. Though the development and humanitarian challenges facing the DRC remain enormous, it has moved off the red-list of immediate conflict concerns for many observers. Current international engagements do not therefore have the same depth or urgency that they did in 2006.

The success of 2006 was also perhaps due to the fact that the candidates were themselves relatively well matched; none had an overwhelming financial or military advantage, though of course the former belligerents, benefitting from campaign funds built up over the war years, had a marked head-start over their opponents from civil society or traditional democratic opposition. The result was that no group was able to systematically prejudice the process, and the head of the National Electoral Commission, Abbé Malu Malu, was able to command broad respect from across the political spectrum. The result, a narrow second round victory for Kabila, was generally accepted as indicative of the will of the people.

The playing field is anything but level today. So the relative lack of international attention can also be understood as indicative of a growing consensus among the international community that the 2011 presidential poll is a foregone conclusion; victory for the incumbent is widely anticipated, including among the Kinshasa diplomatic community. This is not to say that Kabila will necessarily have received the most votes on November 28, though

that is of course possible. Patterns of political support are extremely difficult to call, rooted in an overlapping mosaic of local, ethnic and regional loyalties.

But given Kabila's grip on the levers of the state – the current head of the Electoral Commission is widely alleged to be a Kabila loyalist, and the courts, security services and media are firmly in his grip – and overwhelming advantage in campaign finance, topped up in recent months by a new wave of deals on natural resources, it is difficult to foresee anything other than a Kabila victory being announced, even if an accurate count of the votes might not warrant it.

The key issue therefore will be one of coming to a judgement as to the credibility of the results as announced, which will be difficult to assess with any confidence. The challenge of conducting nation-wide elections is immense: 60,000 polling stations in a country the size of Western Europe, with extremely limited infrastructure and weak administrative capacity, and with less assistance than in 2006, make for chaotic polls. Counting and collation of votes will be of mixed quality, particularly in constituencies with hundreds of candidates, and results will trickle in piecemeal over a period of days, if not weeks. There has been no meaningful polling of public opinion, and though there will be local and international observers on the ground, including an EU observation mission - roughly half the size of the one sent in 2006 - and teams from the Carter Centre and the Southern African Development Community, among others, there is no mechanism in place to conduct a parallel count, or to systematically collate reports.

Allegations of rigging, intimidation, bribery and fraud are inevitable, as are criticisms of the organisation and logistics. But they are likely to be fragmentary rather than comprehensive, and will be levelled at all political actors. With events in Cote D'Ivoire still fresh in the memory of many – when the UN mission was drawn in to acting as arbiter for the election, and thus implicated in the resulting violence – international observers are likely to restrict themselves to judging the quality of the process, not the reliability of the result. Thus, barring a complete meltdown of the process, there is unlikely to be a clear *prima facie* case for rejecting the result, despite evident shortfalls. So, facing a likely choice between accepting a democratically-dubious result and risking chaos by rejecting it, it is perhaps unsurprising that the international community has quietly declined to involve itself too deeply.

The Nature of Congolese Politics

As well as a lack of support and the challenges of a dysfunctional state, the scenario outlined above is also due to weakness of the Congolese opposition, notably in terms of co-ordination. One consensus opposition candidate, able to unite anti-government votes from disparate parts of the country, would have provided a more coherent threat to the incumbent, and would have had a real chance of victory. Co-ordination between the key opposition figures, Etienne Tshisekedi and Vital Kamerhe, was unachievable in part due to personalities. Tshisekedi has been the eternal bridesmaid of Congolese politics, a long-term pro-democracy campaigner who nearly succeeded in unseating Mobutu in the early 1990s, only to be pushed to the periphery of Congo's politics by war. He is now 78 years old, infirm, and reported to see himself as the rightful president of the country; he is likely to have little sympathy for the kind of power-sharing that would have been necessary to build a coalition.

But the failure of opposition figures to effectively coordinate is also due to the nature of Congolese politics. While the 2006 elections were seen by external observers as marking the start of a democratic era for the DRC, it seems likely that many in the country's political class regarded them as a competition to replace Mobutu at the top of the Congolese system. Kabila now sits at the centre of a state that has very little functional contact with most of the country. This state maintains direct control of a few economically and strategically vital mining areas, ports, airports and electricity generation, and is content to leave the rest of the DRC to largely govern itself or delegate to proxies - powerful individuals allowed to profit from control of bits of the state on the tacit understanding that they do not threaten the overall control of the President.

Therefore individuals stand for election for reasons that have little to do with politics as understood more generally, and more with positioning themselves to be offered a lucrative position in the hierarchy. This goes some way to explaining why candidates with little chance of victory nonetheless put themselves forward. Mbusa Nyamwisi, former rebel and serving Minister who resigned to run against Kabila, may be a good example. He is likely to pick up votes only from his own community, the Nande, who dominate the north of North Kivu, and thus has little chance of victory. But by standing as a candidate he is reminding the presidency of the number and weight of his people, thus laying down a marker that he – and by extension the community he represents – are to be well treated in future. It would be a surprise not to

see him brought back into government after the process concludes, regardless of who wins.

The same dynamic works at sub-national levels too. The fact that some National Assembly constituencies have hundreds of candidates per seat seems somewhat absurd, given each individual's chance of being elected, unless becoming a candidate is understood as a negotiating tool to be brought in – or paid off – by someone further up the political chain.

This is not to say that some at both grassroots and national levels do not want real political change. Alphonse Makiaba, a local cycle-taxi driver in Kisangani, the DRC's second city, is standing as a National Assembly candidate, and has reportedly both resisted attempts at co-option and mobilised genuine grassroots support, and there are doubtless many others who would like to see meaningful reform.

But the current Congolese system does not allow much space for such concerns. It is telling that Kamerhe has run a relatively low key campaign, despite what seem to be genuine reforming instincts. Rather than angling for outright victory this time, either alone or in tandem with Tshisekedi, and risking an overt confrontation with Kabila that he can only lose, it may be that the former President of the National Assembly is positioning himself to gain national and international profile sufficient to be brought back into a new government, perhaps in order to run for president in the future.

That Congolese national politics can be defined as an extended negotiation for positions in a fundamentally unchanging – and, for the vast majority of the population, abusive – system is well understood by the Congolese people. Few among them hold out much hope of a government that is reactive to their manifest needs, at least at the level of Kinshasa politics. Cynicism about political actors of all parties runs deep in the DRC.

But they are also subject to the demands of the system, and know that getting one of their own into a position of authority is the only way that they can hope to benefit from some crumbs from the Kinshasa top table and so may well turn out in relatively large numbers, despite their cynicism. Actors at all levels, from voters to presidential candidates, are forced to engage in an electoral process that they know is unlikely to bring any real change as the only way to secure vital resources for themselves and their communities. Reform is deferred and the system replicated.

The Importance of Local Politics

It is important to note that the November vote is just the start of a long season of elections. Provincial Assembly members will be voted for in early 2012, followed, at least in theory, by local elections in 2013. These local elections were first due in 2005, but have been endlessly delayed. A weary acceptance among the population of the dynamics of national politics means that violent reaction, while very likely in Kinshasa and other urban centres, will remain sporadic, short-term, and essentially limited to die-hard opposition supporters, or linked to local controversies over individual National Assembly seats. It is worth recognising that a population that lives hand-to-mouth has little capacity for the kind of sustained protest seen in North Africa.

However, as politics gets closer to home, first with the election of Provincial Assembly members – who have the vital task of selecting Provincial Governors – then of local Mayors, administrators and council members, so issues of real salience to communities will come to the fore, and the risk of a series of brushfire local conflicts will become ever more acute. If change to the Congolese system strangling national political discourse is to come, it will come from below – from pressure from the long-suffering Congolese people themselves. It is thus vital that the Provincial and Local Elections take place. But as the stakes get higher, so will the risks. The international community may have chosen to distance itself from the theatrical game of Congolese national politics, but should remain alert and engaged as the coming high-stakes local elections could be transformative.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Shepherd is an Associate Fellow of the Africa Programme at Chatham House. He is an expert on French speaking Africa and the politics of the Great Lakes region. He was formerly a Foreign and Commonwealth Office Research Analyst.