

The Democratic Republic of Congo: Beyond the elections

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The world watched and lauded the Democratic Republic of Congo's historic elections in 2006. The country has been ravaged by war, inequality, injustice, corruption, poor health, hunger and poverty and the elections were generally regarded as a step towards ending this history of suffering. Given the circumstances, the elections were a resounding success but the root causes of the conflict and neglect remain. The pervasive problems will cripple the new government if they are not immediately addressed. This commentary argues that the elections should not serve as an exit strategy and that there should be continued and increased international attention to ensure security and stability. The elections should also not be seen as the final chapter in a peace process but rather as the first step in solving the evils that plague the DRC. The elections were not the answer, but simply means to an end.

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Introduction

There was widespread relief and satisfaction following the successful October 2006 presidential elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The world heaved a sigh of relief at the conclusion of the country's first democratic elections since independence in 1960. Despite the logistical nightmare and history of diverging and competing interests, citizens elected a leader in spite of fears that there would be large-scale violence and a stalemated outcome. The inklings of democracy are now apparent. But, a democratic election means next to nothing if it is merely a brief respite in a protracted crisis. An election only matters when it fosters, establishes or supports a functional, responsive and stable government. The actual problems must be dealt with for a durable peace to emerge.

Will the recent elections in the DRC improve its current situation? An election is not a solution, but a means for finding an answer or reflecting on a conclusion. What happens now and in the future is more important than the election or its results. The success of the electoral process should inspire a renewed effort to demobilise rebel groups, integrate militias into the national army and slowly build a responsible government that can address the needs of the population.

The DRC is a largely forgotten and failed state in Central Africa associated with an endless scramble for power and resources. Rulers who enriched themselves at the expense of the citizens have plagued this mineral-wealthy but poverty-stricken country. The Congolese people endured a brutal colonial occupation and over thirty years of Mobutu Sese Seko's despotic rule before Laurent Kabila was swept to power in 1997. Kabila enjoyed backing from Rwanda (this was partially an extension of the Rwandan war), Uganda and other neighbouring countries. Some of the same neighbours who propelled him to power, however, soon denigrated his actions and choices. A number of countries had legitimate complaints that rebel forces were using the DRC's land to stage raids.

One of the bloodiest wars the world has witnessed in fifty years officially began in 1998. Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi attempted to topple Kabila, but other states, including Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia, came to his defence. With the inclusion of over half a dozen states and mercenaries from around the world, it was dubbed the 'African world war'. In 2001, Laurent Kabila was assassinated and his son, Joseph, ascended to power. Tensions decreased as there were greater opportunities for diplomacy and by 2003 the war was formally over. The International Rescue Committee estimates that four million people have been killed due to the war and its effects since 1998 (Coghlan et al 2006). 'This makes the crisis in Congo the deadliest anywhere since the end of World War II, dwarfing Bosnia, Kosovo, Darfur, and even the South Asian tsunami' (Brennan & Husarska 2006). A large proportion of these deaths were indirectly caused by the fighting – preventable and treatable diseases and malnutrition that plague the

war-ravaged country. Recent studies suggest that over 1 000 people still die in relation to the conflict every day (Coghlan et al 2006).

Despite the severity, the war received limited international attention. There was a widespread perception that the DRC possessed little geopolitical significance. For instance, notwithstanding its inclusion in Médecins Sans Frontières' (MSF) annual list of the *Ten most underreported humanitarian stories* for the past eight years, the country has gone 'virtually unnoticed to the rest of the world' despite the 'extreme deprivation and violence endured by millions of Congolese' (Médecins Sans Frontières 2006). World powers and the international media simply ignored the tragedy. But with the elections and a greater reason for hope, the cameras returned. The attention, however, was fleeting. 'The elections may have thrust the DRC into the media spotlight for a brief moment, but the extreme deprivation and violence endured by millions of Congolese continued unabated and out of view' (Médecins Sans Frontières 2007).

On 29 October 2006, Congolese voters marched to the polls for the second round of presidential elections amid sporadic violence and constant threat. The runoff pitted the incumbent, Joseph Kabila, against Jean Pierre Bemba (who has been accused of war crimes by international human rights organisations). The election was supported by 1 200 European Union troops and the United Nation's largest peacekeeping force – 17 600 strong. The UN spent over \$500 million to ensure the event's success and credibility. Thankfully, international observers deemed the election relatively free and fair, despite claims of irregularities and isolated incidences of violence. Even when tensions began to rise as the results were confirmed, Bemba conceded defeat and vowed to form a loyal opposition. With the strength of the UN force, EU troops and the challenger's promise for peace, major unrest was averted. Kabila took office on 6 December 2006 with international fanfare.

The voting was touted as the remedy to all Congolese problems. Stories lauded the accomplishment and credited world leaders with altruistically assisting in the historic achievement. International media highlighted the event's importance. The *New York Times* ran an article immediately following the first round in July entitled 'Congo votes in its first multiparty election in 46 years', emphasising that the election 'was no small feat' (Gettleman 2006). The occasion marked the culmination of years of peace efforts and perhaps the pinnacle of positive foreign involvement.

As the post-election euphoria dissipates, should we assume that the goals have been accomplished? Is this the end? Should the international community walk away with faith that stability and security are assured?

With success in hand, EU peacekeepers began leaving the DRC immediately after their mandate ended on 30 November 2006. Leaders hailed the election and the mission's

triumphant conclusion. Javier Solana, the EU foreign policy chief, was quoted in November proclaiming that 'things are going more in the right direction' (Associated Press 2006). The number of UN personnel may also fall as countries debate the benefits of a continued presence and attempt to balance the cost and impact. The fear is international focus and pressure will subside as the election slips into oblivion.

The election's limitations have been neglected. An election is a tangible example, but democracy is more than voting. There is little possibility for an accountable government to emerge even after successful polls, violent conflict was contained and losers restrained. The DRC is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Transparency International ranked it near the bottom of its Corruption Perceptions Index 2006. It has been unable to provide adequate education and healthcare. The economy disintegrated after years of strife – ushering in endemic poverty and weakening government institutions, and allowing military forces (the national army and militias) to abuse and exploit the civilian population.

The problems of governance will not be solved with voting alone. Everything is interconnected. Without security and stability, the devastating effects of the conflict will not ease or erase. Without reducing corruption, the economy will not thrive and the country's resources will not benefit the entire population. Without means to retain food or receive medical care, health indicators will not improve. Without a successful peace-building process in the DRC, there is a great possibility that the Great Lakes Region could be destabilised again in the future. The DRC's post-conflict reconstruction should entail reconciliation, restorative justice, respect for the rule of law, consolidation of democracy, security sector reforms, and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR).

For the foreseeable future, the obstacles are immense and perhaps insurmountable. So what's the point? Why spend so much money on a hopeless country in a location of the world that apparently carries little geopolitical weight? Since the election is over and violence has largely been prevented, why should the international community bother to stay involved? In order for the election to achieve any of its stated objectives, the political leadership – with the support of the international community – must confront the daunting tasks of meeting citizens' needs. The election can inspire and propel change, but a proper understanding of the problems and their ramifications is essential.

Broadly speaking, immediate action must be taken to improve the economic, political and military situations. The DRC must utilise its rich natural resources and put in place government institutions that can lift the Congolese people out of poverty. Control and ownership over its resources must be clearly defined and enforced and unfair contracts with international companies must be renegotiated to make certain that civilians reap future benefits. Through transparency, accountability and the installation of properly running government institutions, corruption and its ill effects can be minimised –

enabling citizens to draw more benefits from the political process while giving them opportunities and incentives to respect the rule of law. Armed groups currently retain access to weapons (the availability of small arms perpetuates and fuels the conflict) and maintain spheres of influence. Foreign powers have the ability to improve security by developing the Congolese security forces' capacity by integrating and disarming rebels. UN peacekeepers must intensify disarmament in order to guarantee stability. All improvements will facilitate others, but failures will negate other accomplishments.

International involvement – whether it is the United Nations, African Union, United States or European Union – has the potential to be beneficial and alter the DRC's long-term outlook if it supports the newly elected and installed government. The elections should not be used as an exit strategy to abandon the country in its greatest hour of need. This support is crucial for the government's legitimacy and support, without which the leaders will be tempted to use other means to obtain.

The solution to accumulated Congolese problems is not in the election, but in what follows – peace or conflict, stability or chaos, development or poverty, democracy or dictatorship. The root causes of the suffering – hunger, poverty, inequality, injustice, illegal activity and competing interests – must be dealt with immediately and directly. It is an exercise in nation and state building, and the election was merely the beginning.

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