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## Congo’s New Citizens’ Movements and Kabila’s Exit

MARTA IÑIGUEZ DE HEREDIA

The election held in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) on December 30, 2018, marked just the second peaceful transfer of power in the nation’s history. The first was in 1960, when the anticolonial movement and a changing international context forced Belgium to grant independence, leading to the creation of the Republic of Congo-Léopoldville (which later became the DRC).

This time around, President Joseph Kabila had finally agreed to step down as required by term limits after nearly two decades in power. He had already stayed on for some two years past the expiration of his last term. His departure ultimately was the result of political pressure led by grassroots pro-democracy movements that have emerged in the past few years.

However, the outcome of the election points neither to the end of Kabila nor to a reduction of pressure from these opposition groups. The official results unexpectedly gave the presidency to Félix Tshisekedi, the son of a former opposition leader, Étienne Tshisekedi. This outcome was widely perceived not as reflecting the actual vote totals, but rather as the product of secret negotiations aimed at ensuring that Kabila’s influence endures behind the scenes. Amid allegations of vote-rigging, opposition to Tshisekedi is already strong, signaling that the elections may have changed the face of power but not the new balance of forces.

### THE OCTOPUS WARS

Joseph Kabila, also known as “Kabila fils” (junior), took power in 2001 after his father, the

president and former guerrilla leader Laurent-Désiré Kabila, was assassinated. In his early years in government, the son was praised by international donors for his apparent commitment to peace, and he helped build trust among the country’s warring parties. But he ended up being widely despised for his complicity in the continuation of armed conflict and for taking an authoritarian path. These choices by Kabila led to the rise of the new opposition movements, which can be seen as a form of demilitarization of the struggle for democracy after the Congo wars that lasted from 1996 to 2003 and left millions dead.

The Congolese historian Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem has compared those wars to an octopus. They were ignited by a coup against the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko in 1996, but soon morphed into what has been called Africa’s World War, with severe social, political, and economic consequences. Some of its immediate origins were to be found in the exhaustion of Mobutu’s 32-year-old regime, the geopolitical transformations brought by the end of the Cold War, and the 1994 genocide in neighboring Rwanda.

The DRC had sunk into an economic crisis while Mobutu governed on a divide-and-rule basis, deepening tensions and inequalities among regions, classes, and ethnic groups. During the Cold War, the United States made Mobutu one of its privileged military and economic aid recipients, since he was perceived as committed to containing the spread of communism in central Africa. But after the fall of the Soviet Union, Washington no longer saw the notorious dictator as a desirable ally. Instead, it turned to rising leaders in the region such as Paul Kagame of Rwanda and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, who epitomized the kind of strong but reformist leaders it now wanted to promote.

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The end of the Cold War unleashed a new wave of popular struggles in Africa, seeking the transformation of military and authoritarian regimes into multiparty democracies. At first, it seemed unlikely that Mobutu's regime would be swept away.

A turning point came in 1994, when Mobutu agreed to harbor hundreds of thousands of refugees from Rwanda, including many government and military officials who had been complicit in the genocide. Some of them soon threatened to return to Rwanda and oust Kagame. Congolese opposition politicians and army officers, led by Laurent Kabila, formed a coalition with Rwanda and Uganda. They staged a coup against Mobutu in 1996. Thousands of young people and peasants, including women, joined the rebellion in hopes of forcing change. Laurent Kabila took power seven months after it started.

However, the armed conflict soon began again, metastasizing into a war that pulled in eight other African countries. Some of them were backed by foreign powers including Britain, France, and the United States. These alliances, as well as transnational networks of military and business elites, served various political, security, and economic interests. Rwanda and Uganda exerted influence over the DRC government through the armed groups they supported. They also took over key military posts and border positions, and exploited Congolese natural resources from minerals to coffee and land. It was not until Joseph Kabila took over from his father that the possibility of peace was seriously envisioned.

## LOST YEARS

In Kabila's early years in government, he appeared to donors to be the man who could lead the country to peace and postconflict reconstruction on the terms they favored. About a year after he took office, the main warring parties reached a power-sharing agreement and a transitional government was formed. A new constitution was approved in a December 2005 referendum. In 2006, the country held its first general election since independence 46 years earlier. The United Nations, the European Union, and other donors supported the transition, and the EU covered 80 percent of the election costs.

The election was hotly contested, including by force of arms. Supporters of Kabila and those of his challenger, former warlord Jean-Pierre Bemba, clashed in the streets of Kinshasa, the capital. Kabila was declared the winner and retained the

support of international donors despite allegations of fraud. Democratization, state reform, and economic liberalization were seen as fundamental steps to position the country for recovery, and Kabila still seemed committed to all of them.

But he did not follow through as expected. Instead, he played the reform card to his advantage and that of other elites and foreign investors. The liberalization of the mining and oil sectors facilitated the rise of Kabila's entourage to a privileged position, but failed to raise living standards for the general population. Reform of the military ended up creating a powerful praetorian guard for Kabila while he turned different sections of the army against each other, making sure that none was strong enough to rebel against him. He did little to rid the army of corruption or of its ties to the DRC's ongoing internal armed conflicts, especially in the eastern provinces. By then, he had already shown signs of an increasing authoritarian turn.

The murder of human rights activist Floribert Chebeya in June 2010, after he was summoned to police headquarters in Kinshasa, came to epitomize the repressive character of the Kabila regime. Rights activists, opposition leaders, and journalists were persecuted. The decentralization process and local elections agreed to as part of the transition were not carried out.

Three main dynamics explain the continuation of armed conflict in the DRC despite the presence of one of the UN's largest peacekeeping forces. First, both Kabila and Kagame continued a proxy war through different armed groups. Each president benefited politically and economically. This situation persisted until about 2013, when international and regional partners increased pressure on Rwanda to stop meddling in the DRC.

Second, armed groups became a tool commonly used to advance the agendas of different actors—elites, traders, political movements, and ethnic groups. In some cases they have served the struggle for democracy and social change, but they have also been responsible for its further militarization. Stalled economic development and political stasis made violence the preferred means for advancing interests ranging from anti-Kabila resistance to control over natural resources. Militias have protected civilians from other armed groups, the army, and the police.

Despite all this, Kabila won another term in the 2011 election. The EU and other donors did not support any other candidate, but nor did they finance the election. All the major international

observation missions reported that they had witnessed vote fraud. Frustration with this outcome and the persistence of armed conflict prompted new groups to rise up and demand the end of the Kabila era.

The strategies Kabila adopted to avoid stepping down at the end of his term in December 2016 inadvertently consolidated this new democratic wave. His gambits included a proposal to amend the constitution in order to redo the census, which would have taken years to finalize. These stalling tactics provoked protests across the country.

The government responded with harsh repression, which drew international condemnation that forced Kabila to retreat. In late 2015, however, he unleashed the decentralization process that had been paralyzed for the past nine years. It entailed the creation of 15 new provinces, with all the administrative chaos that implied.

When elections finally took place in December 2018 after a delay of more than two years, tensions were high. To many experts, the official results revealed a “Putin-Medvedev strategy”—that is, a *de jure* transfer of power to a weak placeholder, while Kabila retains *de facto* power that may eventually allow him to reclaim the presidency, just as Vladimir Putin did in Russia in 2012 after switching places with Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in 2008.

The National Electoral Commission (CENI) inexplicably postponed the announcement of the presidential election results while Tshisekedi and Kabila met privately. But it released the results of the legislative and provincial elections even before the compilation process had finished.

Tshisekedi appeared to be well behind Martin Fayulu, who had led in public opinion polls ahead of the election. In fact, leaks of CENI results and those of the Congolese Episcopal Conference, which ran the largest local electoral observation mission, showed that Fayulu had won by an ample margin, with around 60 percent of the vote. But according to CENI's official results, released January 10, Tshisekedi won with 38.6 percent of the vote, trailed by Fayulu with 34.8 percent. Fayulu filed an unsuccessful challenge to those results at the Constitutional Court.

Kabila's Common Front for Congo coalition won a solid majority in the parliamentary elections, taking 70 percent of the seats—while Tshi-

sekedi's party, the Union for Democracy and Social Progress, failed to win any seats. Kabila's coalition also won a majority in the provincial elections, allowing it to elect the president of the Senate. That could relegate the president to merely formal functions.

## CHANGE AGENTS

The lack of progress on development, democracy, and peace under Kabila motivated new social movements to spring up to oppose his attempts to extend his hold on power. Dismal Congolese living standards did not improve during his presidency. According to the latest UN human development indicators, 90.5 percent of the DRC's citizens can be categorized as working poor, living on less than \$3.10 per day. The country has one of the world's richest reserves of minerals, but most of the population has seen little benefit.

The security situation has also deteriorated. The northeastern territories of Beni and Ituri, as well as central Kasai province, recently witnessed a series of massacres. Although the details are murky, several investigations have found that the Kabila government was responsible for them, in an attempt to put down local opposition and rebellions. This violence has boosted the number of displaced people to levels unseen for two decades—there are now some 4.5 million in the DRC—and driven living standards even lower.

Many young people have come to believe that their aspirations for the future are doomed. They see themselves as trapped in the same place as their parents, struggling to survive every day. Now many have stepped forward to organize for change. While the initiators of these movements have tended to be educated urban dwellers, if not members of the middle class (such as professors, lawyers, and professionals working for international agencies), their rapid spread throughout the country demonstrates their ability to rally widespread support.

They have done so by opting for what can be called a “third way,” choosing neither to take up arms nor to form yet another political party. Instead, they have followed the example of many in Africa since what should be known as the Afro-Arab uprisings began in Tunisia in late 2010—organizing in alternative forms, from the bottom up, and demanding change in peaceful ways.

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All across Africa (and this began even before the Tunisian uprising), new social movements staking claims for democracy and development have staged protests and uprisings, organizing largely outside the traditional structures of political parties and unions. This regional phenomenon has multiplied Congolese groups' contacts, legitimacy, visibility, and support.

Struggle for Change (LUCHA), for instance, was formed in 2012 by a group of youths in Goma, in eastern Congo, after a surge in violence developed into one of the main crises the Kabila government and the UN mission in the DRC have faced since the postwar transition. A contingent of renegade soldiers from an armed group that struck an agreement with the government in 2009 to be absorbed into the army claimed that the terms of the deal were not being fulfilled. Backed by Rwanda, this faction seized control of the city of Goma, despite the UN force stationed there.

LUCHA was organized in response to this crisis. But it decided at the time to focus on the lack of a basic necessity: clean drinking water. It held this up as a symbol of what the DRC could be—the country has one of the largest reserves of water in Africa—and to highlight the failures of its leaders and international actors, especially the UN, development agencies, and NGOs.

LUCHA has grown since then into a national movement with international reach. Others like Filimbi and Compte à Rebours, which formed to press Kabila to leave power and to demand democracy, have followed suit despite limited resources. They do not have large institutional infrastructures, but rely on their members to find ways to organize protests and performances, whether that means meeting in someone's backyard or in a room offered by a friendly group.

The performative approach to protest has been a common trend in Africa's new social movements, which count many artists and musicians among their members. In the DRC, protests and campaigns have featured special visual elements, music, and other performances. Social media is another primary tool they rely on. The Kabila government cut off the country's Internet connection on many occasions in an attempt to suppress the influence of these movements. Yet such heavy-handed reactions have only strengthened them.

The new movements have managed to create real momentum, with offshoots and protests rapidly spreading across the country. They have articulated an agenda for change in ways that have generated consensus and mobilization among people of different ages and backgrounds—rural and urban, elites and working class. By taking the lead in the opposition to Kabila's efforts to cling to power, they have given fresh impetus to the project of renewing democracy in the DRC. They have also emerged as a powerful force in relations with international donors like the United States and the EU, pushing them to respond to Kabila's human rights violations.

This success, however, has come at a cost. Many members of these groups have ended up in jail, in exile, or dead. One of the most visible leaders of LUCHA, Luc Nkulula, died in suspicious circumstances when his house was set on fire in June 2018. His fate came to symbolize the high price of activism.

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Yet the very existence of these groups marks a new era in Congo's history of democratic struggle, which goes back to the colonial era and leaders like Simon Kimbangu, who founded an independent church that challenged the moral pretensions of the colonizers, and

Patrice Lumumba, who finally led the country to independence and became its first prime minister before he was assassinated in 1961. The contemporary pro-democracy movements have a social base and strong international support. Some of their actions have been sponsored by the US Agency for International Development. Their leaders have received prizes from Western institutions, delivered talks at top Western universities, and drawn coverage in the Western media. After protests demanding elections and Kabila's departure were harshly repressed in 2015 and 2016, the United States and the EU imposed sanctions on government officials.

In many respects, however, this support has gone no deeper than the surface. It was not a secret that the favored 2018 presidential candidate among donors and UN experts was Kabila's own chosen successor, Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary. The international actors most involved in the DRC preferred political continuity to change. After all, the economic policies that Kabila put in place to consolidate power for him and his entourage have

also benefited economic interests those donors represent—by shifting control over Congolese resources out of the country.

## A LIVING TRADITION

Although the rapid rise of democratic movements is tied to the country's specific circumstances of recent years, Congo has long had a healthy culture of voluntary associations and discussion of political alternatives. It is a common mistake to think of the DRC as a country where there is no civil society and no political ideologies or movements. But as the economist Mbaya Kankwenda, the historian Herbert Weiss, and others have noted, the country's history and culture of social and political association traditionally provided the means to survive, resist, and air critical views. It is also thanks to civil society that years of war have not resulted in a much worse humanitarian catastrophe.

Congolese civil society includes not only the larger institutions such as churches and unions, but also rural and credit cooperatives, workers' cooperatives, and issue-specific associations. The Catholic Church was what the Congo expert Thomas Turner calls one of the foundations of the tripartite power system that colonization imposed, along with the administration and corporate interests. And yet, as in most colonial and postcolonial contexts, its institutions were often subverted for the purpose of advancing multiple political agendas from the grassroots. Local churches played a double role throughout the colonial period, commonly serving as a safe harbor (whether with the full knowledge of its leaders or not) where people plotted strategies of resistance against their exploitation by companies and landlords.

More recently, the Church both backed and opposed Kabila. While it gave him support, especially in his early years as president, it sharply criticized his reluctance to hold elections and openly accused him of rigging the results of the December 2018 vote. As in colonial times, the Church has often played the role of local authority, especially in remote rural areas where the state administration could not reach, while serving as an umbrella organization for the provision of multiple services such as education, health, and mediation of violent conflicts and political disputes.

The ongoing state of conflict brought a boom in international aid, which spawned local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to all sorts of issues. The aid influx facilitated the growth of

an already rich fabric of cooperatives, associations, and civil society groups by giving them access to funding, allowing them to bypass both the government and the Church to deliver social services. Thanks to these funds, many groups could build hospitals, schools, and infrastructure for transportation or water sanitation, all of which would have been impossible to expect from the government. Even beyond the reach of this international funding, the associative tradition has remained robust. Cooperatives and other associations including women's groups and religious organizations help people cope with shortages of basic necessities.

Yet it would be wrong to see these associations as purely survival-orientated. They also provide a means of articulating political demands and alternatives, sometimes indirectly. LUCHA first emerged not with a call to overhaul the political system and deliver real democracy, but with a demand that the state fulfill its promise to bring clean water to Goma, a city on the shore of Lake Kivu, one of the Great Lakes of East Africa. For its one million citizens, lacking access to water has always been the most vivid example of the paradoxes and problems they face daily.

When the provincial government finally launched an initiative to pump water from the lake, the pumps malfunctioned. The government and an NGO involved in the process blamed each other for the debacle. LUCHA seized on this as a symbolic moment that represented both the corruption of the government and the self-serving, ineffective activities of NGOs. Far from addressing the deep causes of poverty in the DRC, they contribute to perpetuating it. LUCHA members started putting up posters with a simple demand: "Goma wants water." The slogan soon appeared on cars and T-shirts. Demonstrations featured the bottles people use to fetch water from the lake and carry it home.

Goma did not get tap water until 2016. But activists were able to link this campaign with a broader critique of the political situation in the DRC and the need for social change and democracy. It became a stepping-stone many young people crossed over to join that cause. This momentum gathered force in opposition to Kabila's clinging to power, and drew international support through networks to other social movements in Africa and beyond.

## NEW WAVE

The rise of the new pro-democracy movements was essential to finally delivering the DRC's long-

deferred change of government. However, Kabila seems to have left everything neatly stitched up to maintain political and economic control over the country. His newly installed successor, Tshisekedi, has already signaled an antagonistic approach to these movements.

This is a new chapter in the history of democratic struggle in the DRC, and the activists are still far from achieving their goals. Still, what the last round of elections has shown is that the pro-democracy groups have helped bring about more than Kabila's exit. They have reset the balance of forces between the government and civil society. One of their most important successes was persuading the Congolese people to mobilize publicly. For the past two decades, the persistence of armed conflict has absorbed the attention and energy of most, if not all, social groups in the country.

Much of the political agenda of the new movements has centered on demands to enhance the quality of democracy by opening up avenues of public participation, as well as to enact development and economic redistribution policies. Until recently much of their activity took place within the confines of the territories and provinces, keeping to traditional channels of communication with the government and international organizations. Now they have made their demands more visible, mobilizing youth in all provinces and generating a common call for change.

The example of the Afro-Arab Spring, which inspired many protests and uprisings throughout Africa and the world, has given the Congolese movements a greater degree of legitimacy and lent more people the confidence to join them. International

donors have begun to support the pro-democracy groups, even if only on the surface. And the activists have expanded their agenda to encompass issues of nationwide concern, which has strengthened and enlarged their appeal. The new movements that emerged after LUCHA was created in 2012 have continued to grow, and so far they have avoided creating rivalries among themselves.

Perhaps one of the most important changes that the rise of pro-democracy groups has brought to the DRC is a demilitarization of politics. The elections in 2006 and 2011 were overshadowed by violence, including armed rebellions. The pro-democracy movements that rose up soon after the 2011 elections to challenge Kabila have taken a nonviolent path, viewing armed resistance as ineffective and counterproductive.

The DRC's challenges remain gigantic in all political, social, and economic areas. In response, the new Congolese citizens' movements are advancing a political agenda for democracy and development. They are also demonstrating a different approach to making political claims. This is not just a nonviolent approach, but one independent of political parties and traditional organizations.

The new movements have revived a historic demand of Congolese society—one that cost Lumumba his life. They insist that democracy cannot merely be a question of elections; it must allow for genuine popular participation and extend to all aspects of life in the DRC. The new pro-democracy movements may not seek to enter the arena of official politics, but they have made clear their intention to continue struggling for social and economic justice. ■