

MORE SHADOW THAN LIGHT. ON THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO THREE AND A HALF YEARS ON FROM THE ELECTIONS AND THE ADOPTION OF THE NEW CONSTITUTION

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Since taking office, President Joseph Kabila has come up against dozens of challengers, including the former rebel leader Bemba, whom he used to fight against. Since then, the domestic agenda has been dominated by the country's economic and social recovery, reform of the justice system, the police and the armed forces. Further objectives are the continued decentralization of the state, which, according to the constitution, is to comprise 26 provinces in future instead of the previous eleven, as well as ensuring that the local elections originally planned for 2009 will take place.

In his inaugural address in December 2006, President Kabila coined the phrase of the "cinq chantiers", i.e. five construction sites, for the development of transport links and schools, water and power supplies and the creation of employment and revenue. However, the extent of destruction, the vast geographic dimensions of the country, and the poor security situation in the country have been posing enormous challenges to the reconstruction efforts from the start.

The next presidential and parliamentary elections are scheduled for 2011, but they are jeopardized by the slow process of voter registration as well as financial and logistical difficulties, just like the local elections that have been postponed repeatedly for years.

In the meantime, President Kabila is concentrating more and more power on himself and his advisors in the presidential office. Prime Minister Muzito, on the other hand, who has been in office since November 2008, is increasingly losing influence. At the end of May, President Kabila commanded that he would personally want to approve any expenditure from 5000 US dollars upwards, without this meeting with any opposition from the government. In July 2009, the former Speaker of the National Assembly Kamerhe, whom Kabila had disempowered and replaced by his acolyte Boshap, founded a party of his own (PRDC: Parti du Renouveau pour la Démocratie au Congo). But it is still unclear as to whether Kamerhe will challenge President Kabila or look for an alliance with Kabila instead. Should he leave Kabila's party, the PPRD, Kamerhe is in danger of losing his mandate according to the constitu-

tion. Kamerhe comes from the province of South Kivu that Kabila absolutely has to win in order to be able to succeed in the presidential elections planned for 2011. The parliamentary opposition parties are at odds with one another. Kabila's main rival from the 2006 election campaign, Jean-Pierre Bemba, faces charges at the International Criminal Court in The Hague and is still on remand. His party, the MLC, is without effective leadership. There is no candidate in sight who might be able to challenge President Kabila in the 2011 elections.

As most of the African countries south of the Sahara, the Democratic Republic of the Congo was mostly unaffected by the immediate effects of the global financial crisis due to the very low developmental standard of its financial sector, but it has felt its secondary effects all the more acutely in the form of falling prices for its main export goods. Serious negative developments have therefore become apparent in the most important economic indicators since October / November 2008. This has had dramatic consequences for the state finances. Consequently, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund had to intervene with emergency aid measures last year. In 2009, the GDP growth fell to approx. 2.7 percent. Inflation, on the other hand, rose from 18 percent (2008) to approx. 34 percent (2009). The main reason for this massive depreciation of the Congolese currency was the central bank expanding the money volume, whereby the government attempted to plug its budget deficits and finance the military activities in the east of the country. Added to this are lower revenues in foreign currencies due to falling raw material prices. As time goes on, the "dollarization" of the Congolese economy is continuing. In spite of all this, the Democratic Republic of the Congo remains a potentially very rich country due to its enormous wealth of natural resources and its agricultural potential. The key to realizing this potential lies in the development of critical infrastructure for goods transport as well as energy supply. The international bodies providing aid have recognized this and are financing projects on a large scale, which are also drawing the attention of financially powerful companies. There are great hopes with respect to construction projects for hydro-electric power stations in various parts of the country that could make it independent of foreign energy.

At the end of 2009, the International Monetary Fund approved a loan agreement with the Democratic Republic of the Congo with the effect that the country can be included in the debt relief programme of the IMF. At the current exchange rate, the loan has a value of approx. 551.45 million dollars and it was approved after the fund pressed the government of the DR Congo successfully to renegotiate an agreement with China involving infrastructure in return for natural resources that would have increased Congo's debt burden in the opinion of the IMF. In future, the IMF will monitor the mining and infrastructure projects negotiated with China closely in order to ensure that these will not jeopardize the capability of the DR Congo to reduce its debts.

The President's "five constructions sites" have made hardly any or no progress during the last three years. Despotism and corruption exist at all levels, daily human rights violations and an ostentatious, "neo-Mobutu-like" lifestyle of the governing elite increase the frustration of a population suffering from rising food prices, high rents and school fees. These problems cannot be masked by a few large prestige projects in the capital. On the contrary, it seems like a mockery when huge posters promise the construction of a people's palace or of a new, ultra-modern airport, and hungry people walk past them, because there is no public transport, and they would not have the money to use it anyway.

In view of the extensive international involvement in the area of development cooperation, the government of the DR Congo is facing increasing criticism from the West. In return for financial aid, the international community naturally insists on the implementation of certain requirements relating to good governance, the fight against despotic violence and corruption, as well as the safeguarding of human rights and democracy. Against the background of insufficient progress in this direction, a different partner is increasingly coming to the fore in the Congo as well – the People's Republic of China, which has been engaged for some years now, mainly on the economic front, applying the simple formula of 'infrastructure in return for resources'.

Not only in the DR Congo are the Chinese demands considerably easier to fulfil than those of the West. To investigate human rights violations and introduce democratic standards, on the other hand, represent tiresome concessions to a number of despots who therefore prefer a deal with China, even if the population shows a great deal of suspicion with respect to the Chinese involvement. Speaking in front of African trade partners in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi in September 2009, US Foreign Secretary Hillary Clinton, for her part, stressed that progress of the African economy depended on "good governance and adherence to the rule of law." Both were "critical to creating positive, predictable investment climates and inclusive economic growth." However, there is probably no way to reverse the trend in Africa and prevent the advance of communist China as the greatest rival to the United States. In many countries, the People's Republic is now the largest trade partner and provider of development aid, albeit using a questionable approach. On the other hand, the USA, for instance, intends to procure 25 percent of its oil imports from sub-Saharan Africa by 2015 and – like the countries of the European Union – is up against the challenge of spanning the divide between taking the moral high ground on the one hand, and pursuing hard economic interests on the other.

All in all, the human rights situation is still highly unsatisfactory three years on from the free elections. Although formally a country subject to the rule of

law, fundamental human rights standards and process standards are largely ignored. Despotism is widespread in the judicial system, the police, and the armed forces.

Three and a half years on from the first free elections, the political reality is bleak. Congo's government has not learned how to govern, parliament does not have the power to exert control over its government, fighting in the east has not stopped, but escalated instead, poverty and misery are on the increase all over the country. Demands to send more UN troops into the Congo as a response will lead nowhere. What is required now is not more soldiers, but different politics. Because the United Nations representatives are also beleaguered; they cannot fulfil their mandate and are allowing themselves to be used by an undisciplined army that is itself spreading fear and dread. The situation is at an impasse, because the expectations of the local people as well as the international aid providers have been dashed again and again for too long – in the end, too many strong parties are profiting from war and violence, as is so often the case.

The reason that the Congolese crisis management is so poor is not least due to some important players simply not having the will to strive for a sustainable solution. People need to embrace a new realism, based on national interests and the limits of their own power. Such an approach, i.e. bringing the economic realities into the national consciousness in the first place in order to subsequently search for a dialog with other players while bundling the means of development cooperation would constitute a first step. It must also be brought home very clearly to the Congolese government that tactical maneuvering and a strategy of avoiding unpleasant topics will not achieve the political success that people in the Congo have been waiting for in vain since the elections. Turning to partners who are not interested in freedom and democracy purely for reasons of profit will pull the current administration into the maelstrom of reignited conflicts. It would once again be the people of this country that is so rich, and yet so poor who would suffer – as has happened for centuries.

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