



Country Report

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Country Office of the Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of Congo before the election

In December, the Democratic Republic of Congo with its 100 million inhabitants goes to the polls - opportunities and challenges

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On 20 December 2023, the people in Africa's second largest country, torn by mismanagement and conflict, are being called to a major event: At the same time, they are electing the President of the Republic, the 500 members of the National Assembly¹, the representatives of the 26 Provincial Parliaments and, for the first time, also the members of the Municipal Councils (Town Councils)². President Félix Tshisekedi, the country's former new hope, is standing for re-election.

The presidential candidates all herald from the familiar political class. Above all, the opposition candidates all stand out for their criticism of the current government and the election process. Political parties in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are seldom led by traditional ideologies or democratic principles - they are frequently bound by strict economic principles. In the past, elections were followed by unrest - in a country as big as Western Europe.

The political situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo

After barely five years in office, President Tshisekedi from the *Union pour la démocratie et le progrès social* (UDPS) must stand for re-election. His renewal as president was - as often the case in Congo due to a disputed election result - the first peaceful change of power in the history of the huge central African country. This year's elections are therefore regarded as a critical test for democracy in the DRC. Above all, national focus is on the Electoral Commission *Commission électorale nationale indépendante* (CENI) and the question whether it will succeed this time in organising credible elections resulting in the new or re-elected president taking over power on 20 January 2024 - a mammoth task in view of the country's enormous size and its desolate infrastructure.

Even with over 900 parties standing for election, the starting position for Tshisekedi and his coalition is promising; this lies on the one hand in the voting system and, on the other, in the opposition's (still) fragmented list of candidates³. In addition, the President has the entire state apparatus, has skilfully expanded his political influence in the five years of his first term of office and successfully freed himself from the power structure of his predecessor, Joseph Kabila.

¹ For which, just short of 24,000 candidates are standing

² The Senators, Governors and Vice Governors are elected indirectly at the end of February/March 2024

³ Since a change to the Constitution in 2011, the President is elected with a simple majority

Look-back to the elections at the end of 2018 and the chaotic announcement of the 2019 election result

The country, which received its independence from Belgium in 1960, is an emergent democracy. Initially, 4 national elections were held after years of dictatorship and civil war⁴. The last presidential elections were held on 30 December 2018. Félix Tshisekedi was subsequently declared the winner: According to official findings by the Electoral Commission, with 38.56% of the votes he was just ahead of his competitor Martin Fayulu (34.82%), supported by several other opposition candidates of ex-President Kabila's choice, Emmanuel Shadary (23.83%). However, the Catholic Bishops Conference *Conférence épiscopale nationale du Congo* (CENCO), the largest civil organisation in the country and with more presence geographically across the country than the central government, identified in its own count a different result. It had placed observers in more than half the polling stations and, at the same time, prepared an account of results, which were posted at the polling stations⁵. With over 60%, CENCO regarded Fayulu as the clear winner. According to this count, Tshisekedi just came second with only 19% ahead of Emmanuel Shadary (18%)⁶. Many observers are therefore of the opinion that Tshisekedi's appointment as president, was the result of secret agreements between him and his predecessor Kabila, who at that time, still had enormous influence in the security and economic sectors. Despite this disputed announcement, the population was overwhelmed by a positive feeling due to huge pressure in the run-up to be able to hold this election after many years of delays. This prevented a third term for the Kabila block and allowed the first peaceful handover of power in the history of the country.

Félix Tshisekedi's first term: Developing an opportunistic coalition

Tshisekedi being appointed President was called by Jean-Yves Le Drian, the then French Foreign Secretary, a "*compromis à l'africaine*" (an African compromise), due to the controversial circumstances⁷. This made for an extremely adverse situation for Felix Tshisekedi as his own party the UDPS – part of the *Socialist International* – only held 23 out of 500 parliamentary seats. After taking office, Tshisekedi certainly understood how to further move the country's political structure in his direction and include a number of political heavyweights in his governing coalition. In addition, he remodelled the administration, national enterprises, and the constitutional court with trusted followers, thus successfully consolidating his authority. He also reduced the influence of the old networks in the armed forces and security sector, which continued to be loyal to his predecessor Kabila.

After a prolonged phase of eighteen months, in which Tshisekedi had no parliamentary majority and on which he was reliant on the support of the Kabila coalition *Front commun pour le Congo* (FCC) he was able to form a coalition of 24 parties. This government has since collapsed again and has been replaced by a new coalition, which came into office with a cabinet reshuffle on 23 March 2023. As such, Tshisekedi's alliance of parties *Union sacrée de la nation* (USN) took this to incorporate a series of further influential politicians into the party. These included Jean-Pierre Bemba, Vital Kamerhe and Antipas Mbusa Nyamwisi. All three lead their own parties, which are particularly popular in the north-eastern and eastern regions of this huge country, i.e. in provinces in which Tshisekedi himself could have hoped for little support even without political alliances.

⁴ 2006, 2011 and 2018

⁵ Which is legally binding in the DRC, which is why it is also an important demand by opposition candidates in these elections

⁶ Wolters, Stephanie 2019: Slamming the door on democracy in the DRC, 18.02.2019, in <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/slamming-the-door-on-democracy-in-the-drc> [25.11.2023].

⁷ RFI 2019: Election en RDC: la Lucha juge les propos de Jean-Yves Le Drian "méprisants", 05.02.2019, in: <https://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20190204-rdc-lucha-propos-jean-yves-drian-election-meprisants-compromis-africaine> [25.11.2023].

These tactical appointments are a smart move by the President in the run-up to the elections, as everyone is now actively campaigning for Tshisekedi⁸. In addition, the President took charge of the electoral authority and the Constitutional Court during his term.

Voids in terms of content and ideology in the Congolese political landscape

Tshisekedi's first presidency is therefore firmly entrenched in the customs of Congolese politics and the whims of the Congolese political landscape: Accordingly, allegiances and networks are being removed from the current power formula and reformed, and partners declared as adversaries or vice versa. Ideology seldom plays a role in this. Even solving the country's most pressing problems (of which the DRC has a lot) takes precedence in the rarest cases⁹.

Controversy surrounding the registration of voters: The political issue of the workings of the Electoral Commission CENI

In a country without a voters' register and identity card, in which the latest census was held in 1984 and where there are no up-to-date statistics on the exact number of residents, election registration is key for the entire running of the electoral process. This process was introduced in December 2022 and still faces organisational, technical, and logistical challenges. Voter registration should have taken place in record time, three months, but this was extended until the end of May 2023. Despite a great deal of scepticism, the CENI went through all pre-election phases. For the first time, Congolese nationals living abroad (in Belgium, Canada, France, South Africa, and the USA) are able to take part in Presidential elections. Nevertheless, Congolese are reporting chaotic situations in some cases - such as waiting for days, issuing illegible voting cards or forced payments to security officers and election commission staff - during voter registration¹⁰. The CENI is attempting to act in a conciliatory manner. For example, by replacing damaged and illegible voter cards.

For security reasons, voter identification and registration could not be carried out completely in some parts of the country, whereby particularly in the eastern provinces, it excluded many people from the electoral process, limiting its legitimacy. In the regions of Northern Kivu, Mai-Ndombe and Maluku on the outskirts of Kinshasa, it is suspected that at least one million voters could not be registered¹¹. However, these figures cannot be independently checked and verified. Retrospective registration is unlikely as this would require a significant improvement in the security situation¹².

⁸ Kamerhe, initially Tshisekedi's head of cabinet, was sentenced to twenty years in prison in 2020 for embezzlement of funds but was acquitted in August 2022 and has since been appointed Minister of the Economy. In the country's legal reality, arrests, convictions, and releases are often part of political business. Bemba, a former rebel leader, was barred from running in the 2018 elections because of a conviction at the International Court of Justice and is Minister of Defence. Mbusa Nyamwisi was foreign minister under Kabila and has a controversial past around the war in eastern Congo.

⁹ On the Human Development Index (HDI), the DRC ranks 179th out of 191. The country's economy is highly dependent on the export of mineral resources (mainly copper, cobalt, coltan, gold) and is characterised by corruption, a lack of legal certainty, bureaucratic arbitrariness, and a desolate infrastructure.

¹⁰ Along with a passport, the ballot card serves the Congolese as a sole means of identification, meaning that motivation for being registered to vote is extremely high (even if someone has no intention whatsoever of voting)

¹¹ International Crisis Group 2023: Élections en RD Congo: limiter les risques de violence, 30.10.2023, in <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-10/312-elections-en-rdc.pdf> [25.11.2023].

¹² Nonetheless, the draft bill for the proportional allocation of seats in Parliament was accepted.

The chairman of the electoral commission, the checking of the voters register and calls for a boycott

The President appointing the political scientist and experienced electoral process expert Denis Kadima already divided the country. Normally unanimously decided between the most important religious communities on the country, only six of the largest religious organisations voted for the appointment of Kadima

¹³. Even if his knowledge of the subject matter is regarded as undisputed, the two largest religious communities, the Catholic and Protestant churches, accused him of being too close to Tshisekedi¹⁴. The opposition also demanded someone new be appointed to the Electoral Commission and that the election timetable be revised. From the point of view of former president Kabila's coalition, this is now a reason for boycotting the chaotic and non-transparent election process. However, despite all justified criticism of the CENI, this decision should be understood as part of the political calculation to prevent its own electoral defeat, which would probably have threatened the alliance if it had participated.

Although the timetable published by the electoral commission has been to the most part adhered to, there are numerous differences of opinion regarding CENI transparency between Tshisekedi's coalition and the opposition parties. Once 47,862,561 voters had been officially registered, the list of voters was adjusted in May 2023, after which the overall number of those entitled to vote was reduced to 43,955,181¹⁵. In particular, duplicate entries (more than two million) and minors (around one million) were removed from the files. This audit, undertaken within the space of six days, resulted in controversial domestic policy discussions. On the one hand, the period for the audit was criticised as too short¹⁶. On the other, the electoral register was also not audited - as in the 2018 election - by the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* (OIF)¹⁷. Instead, the CENI itself recruited a team of experts, which consists of a South African, a Malawian and three Congolese. The opposition and various civil actors are demanding that voter data be audited by an (from their point of view) independent international body.

¹³ These are the Orthodox Church, the Islamic Community, the Revival Church, the Salvation Army, the Church of the Kimbanguists and the Union of Independent Churches of the Congo.

¹⁴ Kadima and Tshisekedi both originate from the Kasai region

¹⁵ Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante 2023: Audit externe fichier électoral RDC - Rapport de mission - May 2023, 16.06.2023, in <https://www.ceni.cd/rapports-dactivites/audit-externe-fichier-electoral-rdc-rapport-de-mission-mai-2023> [25.11.2023].

¹⁶ In 2018, the CENI had the electoral roll checked within 19 days. The then UNDP expert Denis Kadima criticised this period as too short.

¹⁷ Among other things as the organisation is led by a Rwandan

The field of the 26 opposition candidates: familiar faces, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and lost causes

Alongside Tshisekedi, who is joining the race for his USN coalition¹⁸ and therefore officially as an independent candidate and not for the UDPS, 25 other candidates submitted their papers for the presidency in good time to the electoral authorities. There is barely any clear ideological difference between them and their election manifestos, if they exist, are (still) hardly known to the population. The short-list contains only two females, who have certainly not been given a chance. In addition, there are numerous candidates running for president again. Also running, will be a retired NFL player, a former head of intelligence (from when the country was still known as Zaire) and two pastors, of whom one claims to be called on by God to lead the country. None of them stand a chance. Their main concern is to increase their level of awareness.

The most promising candidates from the opposition camp include:

Moïse Katumbi (58) earned his millions as an entrepreneur and heads the football club T.P. Mazembe as chairman. He is a former governor of Katanga - by far the country's economically strongest region. He also undisputedly receives the most support in this part of the country. He already announced that he was running for presidency in December 2022 without being officially put forward by his party *Ensemble pour la République (Ensemble)*. Before the coalition collapsed, his party *Ensemble* was part of Tshisekedi's government and provided five ministers. One of these ex-ministers, Cherubin Okenda, became spokesperson for the opposition party. In June 2023, Okenda was murdered in circumstances that are still unclear. Due to the fact that the Tshisekedi camp rated Katumbi as a promising candidate, this murder is particularly politically controversial. In the run-up to the last elections, Katumbi was accused by the then government of having hired mercenaries to overthrow Kabila so that he had to leave the country and was unable to take part in the 2018 elections. The well-networked politician then supported Martin Fayulu as a candidate. Once Tshisekedi took office, investigations against Katumbi were discontinued, which was assessed by many observers at the time as a new era of political openness under the new regime.

Martin Fayulu (66), chairman of the party *Engagement pour la citoyenneté et le développement (ECiDé)* after initial hesitation, is standing as presidential candidate. He is mainly in Kinshasa and in the western provinces. However, he lost a lot of trust when his party did not nominate any candidates for the parliamentary and provincial elections, as an expression of boycotting the electoral process. He changed his mind for his own run at president and submitted it a few days before the deadline expired. As a result, his party would not have a single representative in parliament if he were elected, which according to the constitution would be entitled to extensive rights. According to Fayulu, up to 10 million people on the electoral roll are fictitious.

Matata Ponyo (59) from the Province of Maniema, from 2012 to 2016 Prime Minister under President Kabila, is chairman of the party *Leadership et gouvernance pour le développement (LGD)*. He was accused by the *Inspection Générale des Finances (IGF)*, an anti-corruption unit founded by Tshisekedi, of having embezzled millions in public funds during his term of office for a major agricultural project. His trial is under way. Another former prime minister of the Kabila regime stood alongside Ponyo: Adolphe Muzito (66) with his party *Nouvel Elan*.

¹⁸ which, according to its own statements, now has more than 500 political parties

Delly Sessanga (53), chairman of the *Envol* party and, since 2006, national Member of Parliament of Kasai Region, has aggressively denounced corrupt practice in Congolese politics, selling himself above all to the youth as a transparent reformer. His prominence hardly extends beyond the Greater Kinshasa area.

At the start of October, a political newcomer also announced that he was running, thus igniting a new dynamic in the field of most promising candidates: **Dr. Denis Mukwege (68)** is a gynaecologist from Bukavu (Southern Kivu) in Eastern Congo, and in 2018 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work with women affected by war. So far, Mukwege is hardly known outside of eastern Congo. As he is well known abroad as a Nobel Peace Prize winner, Tshisekedi got carried away in labelling him indirectly as a foreign puppet. Mukwege's response is that he is the most Congolese of all candidates and that he had – unlike Tshisekedi, who had only been heard of through his father a former well-known opposition politician and had lived in Belgium on welfare – served the country locally, for 40 years¹⁹. He is not only vilified as “the West's” candidate but also caused controversy in the eyes of some international experts with the appointment of his campaign manager who previously attracted attention for ethnic hatred²⁰.

As the opposition has significantly lower chances of electoral success in a fragmented constellation, due to the simple majority electoral system, a joint candidacy would be essential for voting Tshisekedi out of office. With regards to a joint candidacy, two main considerations play a decisive role: On one hand, it was tactical to not announce a joint candidacy too early to avoid being legally prevented from participating in the election, by the electoral authorities or the Constitutional Court²¹. On the other hand, it is unclear whether candidates who withdraw their candidacy will also appear on the ballot, as was the case in 2018. During his interview, Mukwege stated that he was open to the idea of naming a joint candidate, and the same could be heard from the other camps²². Ponyo was the first to step out and announced on 19 November that he will be backing Katumbi. As this alliance will certainly not be enough for election success, it remains clear that a long delay is risky as election day draws ever closer and a joint candidate would still need to increase his popularity among the population.

¹⁹ Kuzamba, Emmanuel 2023: Mukwege réagit aux piques de Tshisekedi: « Je suis au Congo depuis 40 ans aux côtés de la population congolaise, j'ai construit des écoles en fabriquant des briques avec cette population », actualite.cd, 09.10.2023, in: <https://actualite.cd/2023/10/09/mukwege-reagit-aux-piques-de-tshisekedi-je-suis-au-congo-depuis-40-ans-aux-cotes-de-la> [25.11.2023].

²⁰ Johnson, Dominic 2023: Der Preisträger und der Hetzer, taz.de, 24.10.2023, in <https://taz.de/Friedensnobelpreistraeger-Denis-Mukwege/!5965352/> [25.11.2023].

²¹ The national electoral authority published the definitive list of candidate after a detailed audit by the Constitutional Court on 18 November. The election campaign officially commenced one day later.

The security situation in eastern Congo and significance for the elections

Bordering Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi, eastern Congo remains the country's centre of conflict. The resurgence of the Tutsi rebel movement, M23 since the end of 2021 and the steady expansion of the area controlled by it in the Nord-Kivu province - together with more than 100 other militias - undoubtedly pose an extreme challenge for holding the elections. At the end of October, the country had a new peak of 6.95 million internally displaced persons²³. In addition, the Rwandan-backed M23 rebels intensified their activities in recent weeks and still control large areas in the east of the country²⁴. On 6 May 2021 the government announced an *État de siège*, with government activity in the Nord-Kivu and Ituri provinces being handed over to the military. One cause for concern is that martial law was further extended by the national government with many restrictions on rights of assembly and freedom, despite a lack of military success.

A decisive question in the election process will be how and if elections can be held in Nord-Kivu. Just short of one thousand East European "security consultants"²⁵ and the task force of the East African Community (EAC) stationed in the region brought no decisive military benefit in the fight against rebel groups.

An additional military operation by UN peacekeepers, otherwise heavily criticised in the country, was recently initiated to protect the city of Goma, with over a million inhabitants, and the neighbouring refugee camps. MONUSCO did not manage to achieve peace over recent decades in the conflict-ridden eastern Congo - its withdrawal, accelerated by Tshisekedi is planned for 2024.

Security forces *Garde Republicaine* (the presidential guard) killed more than 50 anti-UN demonstrators in Goma on 30 August 2023 sparking a new domestic issue surrounding the conflict in the east of the country²⁶. As a result, Nord-Kivu's military governor was forced to resign. Since then, his successor has expanded cooperation with Congolese militias - with so-called *Wazalendo* (patriotic) combat troops. These clashes could be intensified in the run-up to the election date and the security situation in eastern Congo instrumentalised for election campaign purposes. The government is aware that it is not very popular in these provinces and would have legitimacy problems, particularly when seeking international recognition of the election result if no elections were held in the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri.

²² Rigaud, Christophe 2023: Denis Mukwege: "l'idéal est de trouver un candidat commun", afrikarabia.com, 09.10.2023 in <https://afrikarabia.com/wordpress/denis-mukwege-lideal-serait-de-trouver-un-candidat-commun/> [25.11.2023].

²³ International Organization for Migration 2023: Record High Displacement in DRC at Nearly 7 Million, 30.10.2023 in: <https://www.iom.int/news/record-high-displacement-drc-nearly-7-million> [25.11.2023].

²⁴ U.S. Department of State 2023: Final Report by UN Group of Experts, 19.06.2023 in <https://www.state.gov/final-report-by-un-group-of-experts/> [25.11.2023].

²⁵ as government militia are officially known

²⁶ Human Rights Watch 2023: DR Congo: Deadly Crackdown in Goma, 31.08.2023 in <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/22/dr-congo-crackdown-opposition-ahead-elections> [25.11.2023].

²⁷ The only certainty is that the elections will not be held in areas in Masisi and Rutshuru controlled by M23 rebels and characterised by flows of refugees.

The mood following Tshisekedi's first term and restrictions on freedom of the press and opinion

The President's first term can be described as completely turbulent. Along with an officially strong upturn in the economy, recent years have been marked by COVID-19 and the growth in rebel violence in the east of the country²⁸. The country still faces numerous humanitarian problems such as displacement, food insecurity and outbreaks of disease. 73% of the population live on less than 2.15 US dollars per day. First and foremost, the government (intend) to sell the introduction of free primary education and free midwifery as a success of their term in office. Even if successes can be registered, particularly in rural regions, a large part of the population has not felt a significant improvement in their day-to-day life in recent years.

Most of the talk in the country does certainly not revolve around policy, rather primarily around political alliances which vary in popularity, depending on the part of the country. In addition, preparations for the election are dividing opinion in the country. Public confidence in the electoral process is low, also because the President was unable to score points with institutional reforms as promised and the disputed 2018 electoral process still lingers in peoples' minds²⁹. Fundamental reforms to electoral law since the last election have failed to materialise. The electoral commission is accused of acting in favour of the President. In addition, Tshisekedi reappointed many judges to the Constitutional Court. These variables could lead to a high number of disappointed non-voters.

First and foremost, opposition politicians are criticising the President for his poor security record in eastern Congo, the rise in corrupt practices along family and ethnic lines as well as ineffective administrative structures and what they see as heavy focus on international diplomacy instead of domestic policies. In addition, there is great disappointment about the opposition's political rights being restricted under Tshisekedi. Violence during a demonstration organised jointly by Katumbi, Ponyo and Sesanga in May 2023 against what they saw as a chaotic election process and the high costs of living is an example of this. The security forces arrested dozens of demonstrators and injured at least thirty of them³⁰. Among other things, the United Nations, the European Union, and the electoral commission CENCO condemned this restricting of the freedom of assembly.

In the same month, the Police prevented the presidential candidate Katumbi from travelling to the interior of the country. In addition, the presidential candidate Ponyo was banned by the mayor from entering the city of Kikwit. In the meantime, candidate Mukwege appears to have had his freedom of movement restricted³¹. Political tension was also heightened by the arrests of opposition members. Along with Franck Diongo and Mike Mukebay, the arrests of Salomon Kalonda, Katumbi's most important political advisor on 30 May at Kinshasa airport, caused particular concern. He is accused of cooperating with Rwanda and the M23 rebels. A few days later, the homes of Kalonda and Katumbi were searched by the military security services. Leading opposition politicians are condemning these arrests and Tshisekedi's (denounced) tendency to totalitarianism³². Nevertheless, how much direct control the president has over the security apparatus remains unclear as both personal interests and networks from the Kabila years continue to create their own dynamic.

²⁷ Which translates as excluding around 15% of voters

²⁸ See <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/drc/overview>, even if needing putting into context with the growth in population.

²⁹ The election results were also disputed in 2006 and 2011.

³⁰ Human Rights Watch 2023: DR Congo: Des manifestations pacifiques violemment réprimées, 29.05.2023 in <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2023/05/29/rd-congo-des-manifestations-pacifiques-violemment-reprimees> [25.11.2023].

³¹ Politico.cd 2023: Présidentielle 2023: Denis Mukwege contraint à reporter son meeting à Bukavu, 15.11.2023 in <https://www.politico.cd/encontinu/2023/11/15/presidentielle-2023-denis-mukwege-constraint-a-reporter-son-meeting-a-bukavu.html/146190/> [25.11.2023].

The murder of the former Minister for Infrastructure, Chérubin Okende, the then spokesperson of the *Ensemble* party, on 13 June 2023 in unclear circumstances, is also aggravating the situation. He disappeared after an appointment at the Constitutional Court, and he was found the next morning, dead in his car, in Kinshasa. The opposition are calling it a political murder. The circumstances remain unclear to this day. An unpublished article points to the involvement of the powerful secret service *Agence nationale de renseignements* (ANR). During the investigations, Reuters journalist, Stanis Bujakera was arrested on 8 September 2023. Despite large-scale mobilisation against his incarceration, the journalist remains in prison. Tshisekedi refused to condemn his arrest during an appearance before the Congolese diaspora in Brussels.

The rise in violence against the Tutsi population is also a cause for concern. Member of Parliament Mwangachuchu, who is accused of collaborating with Rwanda and was sentenced to death, claims to have only been arrested due to his ethnicity. The DRC's archenemy, the small neighbouring country of Rwanda, is blamed for many of the country's problems, leading to dangerous rhetoric against (supposed) individuals of Rwandan descent. People were denied access to registration offices for the elections due to their presumed origin. In addition, there are videos circulating of Congolese nationals of Tutsi origin (Banyamulenge) being persecuted, harassed, and beaten in public. Many Congolese do not see them as fellow countrymen, but in eastern Congo in particular, the ethnic groups are intermingled due to a complex history dating back to colonial times. For example, on 9 November an army officer of Tutsi origin was killed by a mob in Goma³³. Dangerous tendencies of upcoming ethnic clashes in the election campaign are on the rise - which can be detected in the form of fake news on Meta, X and WhatsApp. In the former province of Katanga, a contestation to the results could further fuel tensions between Tshisekedi's home region of Kasai and presidential candidate Katumbi's economically powerful home province of Katanga.

³² La Prospérité 2023: Salomon Kalonda : le bloc de l'opposition exige sa libération immédiate et sans condition, 01.06.2023 in <https://laprosperiteonline.net/salomon-kalonda-le-bloc-de-lopposition-exige-sa-liberation-immEDIATE-et-sans-condition/> [25.11.2023].

³³ 7sur7 2023: Un militaire confondu avec un rebelle battu à mort en République démocratique du Congo, 11.11.2023 in <https://www.7sur7.be/monde/un-militaire-confondu-avec-un-rebelle-battu-a-mort-en-republique-democratique-du-congo-a4333a821/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F> [25.11.2023].

A possible coalition of opposition candidates and risks for the further election process.

A joint statement at the end of October in which the collaboration of opposition candidates was announced to prevent any manipulation of the results as well as a meeting of the main candidates' representatives in mid-November in Pretoria are the first indications of a joint candidacy. Together they are demanding, among other things, the publication of the list of voters and mapping of the polling stations³⁴. To ensure the highest possible transparency, the CENI was able to publish its detailed budget and its logistics plan. In this way, manipulation possibilities are minimised using electronic voting machines already used in 2018 and flown in from South Korea by the company Miru System and, among other things, distributed with the help of MONUSCO throughout the country. In order to not fuel the mood in the country, particular care should be given to preventing the increased availability of voting machines in Tshisekedi-friendly regions. Extreme tropical temperatures and nationwide energy shortages can also lead to technical challenges, that appear to be previously insufficiently resolved. Votes are cast both electronically and in person, which should increase credibility³⁵.

Despite the government's efforts to finance the entire election process from its own funds, the electoral commission has had to deal with liquidity problems. The CENI, according to which the entire election process should cost around 1.1 billion US dollars³⁶ only paid wages reluctantly to its staff. If the CENI continues to fall behind with payments, some electoral commission employees could try to make money from the vote. The timely payment of employees is therefore crucial. Should the opposition (continue to) be suppressed and/or have the feeling that the election results are being decided arbitrarily, many Congolese could (violently) express their dissent.

Presidential candidate Sessanga has already stated that he only intends to accept the announcement by the Conference of Bishops and not the CENI result, an understandable statement due to experience in 2018³⁷. For the other candidates, too, participating in the elections will in no way mean recognition of the election result of the electoral commission. In 2019 the result was primarily accepted by the population, as they had had enough of Kabila's system and change was more important than the type of change. As electoral law is insufficiently clear as to how the CENI should publish the result, it should increase its credibility and publish the result as transparently as possible. Otherwise, announcement of the results of the presidential elections in January 2024 could cause violent demonstrations.

³⁴ Rolley, Sonia 2023: Congo presidential candidates call for urgent measures to 'save' election, Reuters, 31.10.2023, in: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/congo-presidential-candidates-call-urgent-measures-save-election-2023-10-31/> [25.11.2023].

³⁵ Actualite.cd 2023: DRC: La CENI a commandé 26 000 nouvelles machines à voter, la livraison prévue dès le mois prochain, 22.09.2023, in RDC: La CENI a commandé 26 000 nouvelles machines à voter, la livraison prévue dès le mois prochain [25.11.2023].

³⁶ Für die Bundestagswahl im September 2021 veranschlagte das Bundesinnenministerium ein Budget von 107 Millionen Euro.

³⁷ Fabricius, Peter 2023: Is DRC heading for another chaotic election?, 03.11.2023, in: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-drc-heading-for-another-chaotic-election> [25.11.2023].

Opportunities and relevance for Germany and Europe

To date, Germany and the international community have held back significantly on taking an official standpoint, except for 2 June, when many like-minded states condemned the violence during demonstrations³⁸. Even though the People's Republic of China is by far the country's main trading partner, Tshisekedi can be seen as a more pro-Western president than his predecessor. In global politics and times of competing systems, the DRC is a country that Germany and Europe could win over much more "for themselves" if a stronger, honest interest, especially in the economic sector, were signalled. In addition, to its immense reserves of raw materials, the DRC has the second largest contiguous area of rain forest in the world. The country confidently links the fulfilment of this key role regarding climate change to far-reaching (financial) demands. Tshisekedi knows that his re-election also depends on (renewed) recognition by the international community, which is why during his term in office he has invested a lot of energy in the diplomatic arena, most recently as a mediator in the conflict in Chad³⁹. This is also why electoral observation missions from the European Union and the American Carter Center for elections were authorised⁴⁰.

A second term for the President after a peaceful and highly transparent election process could not only mean political stability in sub-Saharan Africa's largest country by area for Germany, Europe, and the West, but also guarantee a potential close partner. Participation by the DRC in the *Compact-With-Africa* initiative at the end of November in Berlin is a genuine attempt to make contact with a government that is much closer to the West than many other countries on the African continent, despite all the difficulties and challenges in global political issues, for example, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine or its relationship with Israel.

Conclusion and Outlook

The fact remains that to date differences in terms of content do not matter in the election campaign; the candidates are standing for themselves and in specific regions (mostly in their region of origin) where they are particularly popular. There are no independent polls by reputable opinion institutes. The most important decision with regards to the outcome of the elections will be in the coming weeks if the opposition can agree on a joint candidate.

The President is already using state facilities and institutions throughout the country for self-promotion, in particular via posters distributed across the nation and the public TV broadcaster RTNC, which already partially resembles a permanent advertisement for the incumbent President. Tshisekedi would like to definitively legitimise his presidency with a successful election for a second

³⁸ Government of Canada 2023: Déclaration conjointe des ambassades des États-Unis, l'Allemagne, la Belgique, le Canada, l'Espagne, la France, la Grèce, l'Italie, le Japon, la Norvège, les Pays-Bas, le Portugal, le Royaume-Uni, la Suède, la Suisse, la République Tchèque, et de la Délégation de l'Union européenne, 02.06.2023, in: https://www.international.gc.ca/country_news-pays_nouvelles/2023-06-02-congo.aspx?lang=fra [25.11.2023].

³⁹ In 2022 he was appointed by the *Economic Community of Central African States* (ECCAS) as chairman of the mediation mission in Chad.

⁴⁰ There certainly still continues to be diplomatic rifts with significant partners. For example, as such the new EU ambassador has waited for his accreditation from August to November.

term. If the most influential opposition candidates are unable to agree on a joint candidate in the near future, a victory for the incumbent seems relatively certain. The question will also arise at the beginning of 2024 of how the announcement of the election result will be accepted in the country. The (new) President of the DRC is due to be inaugurated on 20 January. However, due to far-reaching logistical and security challenges, whether the election can take place with minimum democratic standards, remains to be seen.

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