

Congo's election That sinking feeling

A general election in the Democratic Republic of Congo may end in tears

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THE windows of the crumbling, colonial-era house that serves as head office for the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS), Congo's main opposition party, are mostly broken from stones and petrol bombs thrown by supporters of President Joseph Kabila in a series of tit-for-tat attacks in September. Inside, rooms are dark and empty except for a few broken chairs and makeshift desks. Political power seems a long way off.

On November 28th Congo will hold its second democratic election since the end in 2002 of a bloody war that left several million dead. The UDPS will field the leading opposition candidate for the presidency, Etienne Tshisekedi. He is trying to convince voters that at 78 he has enough life in him to rule this most unruly of African countries. In the 1980s and 1990s, he was tortured and imprisoned for years as head of the opposition against Mobutu Sese Seko, the kleptocrat who ran Congo from 1965 to 1997.

Life and politics have improved since then, but not nearly as much as it was hoped. Mr Tshisekedi spent the first two weeks of the official 30-day election campaign in South Africa trying to find the millions of dollars needed to promote his wares in a country that is almost the size of western Europe and has a population exceeding 70m. This month the UN named Congo as the least developed country in the world. Only 9% of its people have even intermittent access to electricity. GDP per person was 50% higher at independence in 1960 than it is today.

In the past five years, Congo has seen its mineral sector rebound, thanks to rising global prices, particularly for copper. The government has brokered a \$6 billion deal with China to trade minerals for infrastructure. The IMF and World Bank forgave Congo about \$12 billion in debt last year after the government agreed to economic reforms. But investors are still reluctant. The sale of mining licences at below-market value to firms associated with friends of the president has raised eyebrows.

Congo remains plagued by corruption and by militias from the civil-war era. Mr Kabila has improved security, especially since making peace in 2009 with his long-time enemy, Rwanda. But violence is still a way of life in parts of the country. The predatory army is far from reformed. Corruption is rife at all levels of the state, from the top of the security forces to local tax collectors. "There has been no growth in employment" in small and medium-sized businesses between 2006 and 2010 because of corruption, says the World Bank.

Mr Tshisekedi claims he will change all that. He has called Mr Kabila's followers terrorists and told his own supporters to storm the country's prisons to free political detainees. Such talk has turned off Western diplomats and international observers. But they view the president, who seems to



have access to unlimited campaign funds, with little more enthusiasm.

Violence, intimidation, arbitrary arrests and deaths during campaigning have been blamed on thugs loyal to him. Some opposition radio stations have been shut down and opposition gatherings banned in parts of the country. Mr Kabila may struggle to repeat his victory of 2006. Eastern Congo, where he won more than 90% of the vote, still suffers from conflict. Mr Tshisekedi will easily win the capital, Kinshasa, and his home region, the two Kasais. That should leave almost half the far-flung country up for grabs.

Whatever the result, doubts about the election's fairness will persist, not least because of a perception that the electoral commission's head is a friend of the president. Logistical problems are also ubiquitous, despite an election budget of \$500m or so. As well as 11 presidential candidates, 18,000 hopefuls, including several pop stars and a rebel leader accused of ordering the rape of more than 300 women in eastern Congo last year, are contesting 50 seats in parliament. Some of the ballots will exceed 50 pages, which will surely daunt even the minority of voters who can read.

Many may fail even to get to see a ballot paper. A little rain before election day in Congo's vast, forested interior could make it impossible to distribute ballots; an almost complete lack of roads means that most voting material must be delivered by helicopters that cannot land if it is too muddy. There is talk of a delay. Few Western diplomats think a decent election can be held on time.

Mr Tshisekedi says Mr Kabila intends to steal the vote, foreshadowing a situation where both men could declare victory. A disputed result would go to Congo's wobbly courts. A grim hope remains that the president might win by a large enough margin to avoid plausible challenges. But the vote could provoke a bloodbath. Jean Claude Katende, head of Congo's African Association for the Defence of Human Rights, says, "No matter who wins, there will be violence."

What makes this poll different from the 2006 one, which was accompanied by vicious fighting, is the limited role of do-gooding outsiders. Five years ago the UN ran the election and made it credible. But in 2009, when Mr Kabila made peace with his arch-foe Rwanda, the UN lost its pre-eminent role. Its 17,000 soldiers still support Congo's government with logistics and oversee its nascent army. **It also funds one of Africa's most admirably independent radio services, Radio Okapi. But it no longer has the will or the power to save Congo from itself.**

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