

Congo: Elections and the Battle for Mineral Resources

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Twenty million voters cast ballots July 30, 2006, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's first free election since 1960. A runoff election three months later, between transitional president Joseph Kabila and transitional vice president Jean-Pierre Bemba, gave Kabila a mandate to lead the war-torn nation for five more years. The elections, in which 33 candidates vied for the presidency, were generally peaceful, although the runoff was hampered by rioting.¹ The international community pinned hopes on these elections, originally scheduled for June 2005, as a way to stabilize Africa's third largest nation. The DR Congo or DRC, as the country is commonly known, has been besieged by fighting since 1996. The stability of this nation—which is as large as Western Europe, has more than 60 million inhabitants, and is bordered by nine countries—is critical for maintaining stability in Central Africa.

When the DRC gained independence from Belgium in 1960, it appeared to have a bright future. After more than a hundred years of European exploitation, it seemed that, at last, Congo's mineral wealth might go to benefit its own citizens. After the country's first free elections, Patrice Lumumba became prime minister and Joseph Kasavubu became president. But Lumumba's African nationalism and anti-imperialist stance alarmed Belgium and the United States, which backed Joseph Mobutu, the head of the army, in a revolt against Lumumba.² In 1961, six months after the 35-year-old Lumumba had taken office, he was assassinated—a murder that many blamed on the CIA and Belgium. In 2002, the Belgian government officially expressed regrets, which the BBC and other international media reported as an apology, over Lumumba's killing.³

In 1965, Mobutu overthrew President Kasavubu and installed himself as president. He established a one-party system and ruled repressively for more than 30 years, during which time he amassed a personal fortune that was estimated at \$4 billion.⁴ He renamed himself Mobutu

Sese Seko and declared that all Congolese must adopt African names. He also renamed the country Zaire and would occasionally hold elections in which he was the only candidate.

First and Second Congo Wars

Fighting flared up in the DRC in 1996. Some analysts say that the fighting in Congo was sparked by the massive flow of refugees fleeing the 1994 genocide in neighboring Rwanda. When Tutsis in Rwanda overthrew the extremist Hutu government that had sponsored the genocide, Hutu militia members and other genocide perpetrators poured into the DRC to escape reprisal. Rwanda then invaded Congo as it chased after perpetrators. Mobutu tried to push out the invading Rwandan Tutsis, but was toppled in 1997 by rebel leader Laurent Kabila (father of the current president), who gathered support across ethnic lines from Congo's majority poor. He was backed at the time by Rwanda and Uganda. Mobutu died the same year of prostate cancer in Morocco.

Rwanda later stopped backing Kabila when he turned against Tutsis in Congo.

Tutsis, as well as Hutus, are among the more than 200 ethnic groups in Congo. The principal groups are Mongo, Luba, and Kongo. Hundreds of languages are also spoken in Congo, with French, Lingala, Swahili, Kikongo, and Tshiluba being the official languages. French is used as the language of government; Lingala is the language of the capital city (and the Equateur Province in the north; during Mobutu's time it was also the language of the armed forces); Swahili is mainly the language of the eastern region. In spite of ethnic and linguistic differences, regional divisions have had a greater impact, with leaders gathering support from specific regions, encompassing varying ethnic groups.

However, many analysts say these rivalries are not the root causes of the conflict, but rather that it is a "resource war" over Congo's enormous mineral wealth—in particular, coltan. Congo is rich in cobalt, copper, petroleum, diamonds, gold, silver, zinc, manganese, tin, uranium, coal, and much more. Eastern areas of the Congo are rich in coltan, which is used in cell phones, laptops, pagers, and other electronic devices. The DRC holds 80 percent of the world's coltan. As global demand for coltan has skyrocketed, so has fighting over control of coltan mines.⁵ Rwanda's invasion of Congo may not have been to go after the perpetrators of genocide, but to seize control of Congo's mineral wealth—particularly the coltan mines, according to *The Independent* journalist and columnist Johann Hari. In a May 2006 article, Hari noted that "... the Rwandan troops did not head for



Distribution of peacekeeping forces of MONUC (United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

the areas where the génocidaires were hiding out. They headed straight for the mines....⁷⁶

By 1998, nine other African nations had joined the fighting, in what became known as the second Congo war. These countries were drawn in, according to Hari, “because they wanted a piece of the Congolese cake.” The war, which became known as Africa’s World War, involved as many as 20 armed groups. Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia, Chad, and Sudan were allied with Kabila, now president of Congo.⁷ Former Kabila allies, Uganda and Rwanda, now allied with Burundi. During this second Congo war, Kabila formed militia groups called “Mai Mai” to push back Rwandan forces. The central government was later unable to rein in these militias, and violence in the eastern provinces, the most mineral-rich section

of the country, has been uncontrollable. In 2001, Kabila was assassinated by one of his own bodyguards in a failed coup plot and Kabila’s son, Joseph, became president.

Nearly four million people have died from the violence and from war-related illness and starvation—more than 45 percent of whom were children, according to the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The IRC and other international groups have declared this the deadliest war since World War II and the deadliest ever recorded in Africa.⁸ The younger Kabila negotiated accords, and the war formally ended in July of 2003, but violent conflict has continued.

Political Leaders and Parties

Joseph Kabila, who spent his childhood in Swahili-speaking East Africa

while his father was in exile, and who fought alongside his father in the east to overthrow Mobutu, is most popular in that region.⁹ Kabila ran for president as an independent, but is a leader of the People’s Party for Reconstruction and Democracy.¹⁰ He does not speak the capital city language of Lingala.¹¹

The losing presidential candidate, Bemba, garnered his support from the west of the country, where he fought during the second Congo war (1998–2003), leading the rebel group that later became his political party—the Movement for the Liberation of Congo. Bemba, one of the wealthiest men in the Congo, was one of four concurrent vice presidents in the transitional government. He worked briefly in 1997 as a financial advisor to Mobutu. Neither party appears to have a clear political ideology.



A combination photo shows President Joseph Kabila (left) and opposition candidate Jean-Pierre Bemba during electoral campaigns in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Pictures taken July 2006. REUTERS/Finbarr O'Reilly



An election official marks the number of votes counted for the two presidential candidates at a polling station in Congo's capital, Kinshasa, October 29, 2006. REUTERS/David Lewis

The presidential election was boycotted by the main opposition party, Union for Democracy and Social Progress, led by former prime minister Etienne Tshisekedi. Tshisekedi, who led parliamentary opposition against Mobutu and was imprisoned numerous times by the dictator, contended that the election organizers were not impartial and were too closely tied to incumbent president Kabila.¹²

Congo's elections were the largest the United Nations has ever helped coordi-

nate. The United Nations set up its mission in the Congo in 1999. The mission and size increased eventually to include 17,600 peacekeeping troops from 58 countries—the largest UN peacekeeping mission in the world, with a budget of \$1.1 billion for 2006–2007.¹³

Despite the emergence of a winner in the monumental election, a lasting peace appeared elusive in the immediate aftermath of the elections. Supporters of Bemba set fire to the Supreme Court in late November as they protested election

results, alleging fraud in the counting process. A week later, UN forces clashed with soldiers of a renegade army general in eastern Congo. In spite of the ongoing tension, international observers have accepted the election results. But the challenge ahead will be not only to establish a viable peace, but economic stability and opportunities for the Congolese people. As people displaced by the fighting and demobilized soldiers begin to return to their homes, national authorities and international agencies will have to work towards ensuring that basic services are provided and basic needs met in order to keep tensions in the Congo from escalating again.

Notes

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