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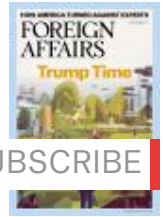
What the Uproar Over Congo's Elections Misses

The Local Roots of the Country's Problems

By Séverine Autesserre

Over the past year, as the Democratic Republic of the Congo has descended into a political crisis, journalists, activists, foreign diplomats, and the leaders of international and nongovernmental organizations have focused mostly on the drama surrounding President Joseph Kabila's attempts to cling to power by delaying elections.

This narrow political focus recalls the outside world's approach to Congo the last times the country prepared for general elections, in 2006 and 2011. Now, as then, the preoccupation with elections distracts from the issues whose resolutions are most likely to lead to peace: the poverty, unemployment, corruption, criminality, and poor access to land, justice, and education that are at the root of Congo's long-standing violence.

Bringing peace and prosperity to Congo will require a change in attitude, away from the crisis in Kinshasa and toward the local actors who have the power to address the deeper sources of the country's troubles.

Supporters of Congolese President Joseph Kabila carry his portrait during a rally in Kinshasa, July 2016.

CRISIS IN KINSHASA

Free and fair elections are relatively new to Congo. The country held its first-ever democratic elections in 2006, in a contest that led to a runoff vote and violence in Kinshasa. Congolese citizens voted again in 2011, but accusations of fraud marred the process. Both times, Kabila and his party took the majority of the votes.

The general elections scheduled for 2016 could have been different. To start, the constitution barred Kabila from running for a third term. More

important, Congolese people have been so disappointed with the performance of their president that, according to one of the only reliable opinion polls available, they were preparing to vote for his political opponents.

But the elections have yet to take place. The government has rescheduled them several times under various pretexts. Kabila's attempts to stay in power generated massive protests in September—and, to a lesser extent, in the following months—which the government violently suppressed. Opposition figures and grassroots activists were harassed, threatened, and, at times, arrested, tortured, and killed. Ordinary people have become wary of discussing elections. When I was in Congo last summer, most of my contacts would lower their voices when talking about the political crisis. Others would look around to make sure nobody was listening.

The end of the year saw a flurry of mediation efforts by the African Union, the United Nations, and Congo's influential Catholic Church. On December 31, the government and a number of opposition parties finally reached an agreement. They pledged to form a transitional government under the leadership of Kabila and a prime minister from the opposition that would lead the country until general elections could be held, which would be done no later than the end of 2017.

Neither of those promises has materialized. The government claims that it does not have the funds necessary to hold elections this year, and the

transitional government has not yet been formed. Meanwhile, the opposition is becoming increasingly divided—a problem that was further complicated by the death of Etienne Tshisekedi, the country's most important opposition leader, in early February.

THE ROOTS OF THE VIOLENCE

Even if political change in Kinshasa were to arrive, however, it would be unlikely to bring peace and prosperity to Congo. The capital is too disconnected from the rest of the country to effectively address its problems. Besides, holding general elections would be unlikely to resolve the many issues that cause misery for most of the country's citizens.

Opinion polls conducted by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative consistently indicate that peace and security are the top priorities of most Congolese. Livelihood problems such as the lack of money, employment, education, and access to food and land are also of great concern. They are followed by governance issues, such as justice.

Most of the violence in Congo is fueled more by these kinds of problems than by the crisis in national politics. (Though some of the ongoing fighting—for instance, the recent clashes in Kinshasa and Bas Congo—is clearly linked to electoral matters.) As I argued in an essay in *Foreign Affairs* in 2008 (and later in a book, *The Trouble with the Congo*),

It is possible to promote peace and prosperity despite Congo's crisis in government.

local matters motivate large parts of the persistent conflicts in Congo's eastern provinces. Those conflicts have been exacerbated by rebel groups from Congo's neighbors—notably Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda—that have taken refuge in Congo and have often allied with local and national power brokers to pursue their own agendas.

In the midst of widespread violence, there can be no meaningful freedoms of expression or movement, nor can there be many of the other conditions that free and fair elections require. And when there are criminals and rebels on whom governing elites can blame disappearances and murders, it is easier for the ruling class to oppress its opponents. This is how the ongoing violence impedes the resolution of the political crisis in Kinshasa.

According to the Congo Research Group, nearly half of Congolese people believe that their country's electoral process, security issues, and economic problems are inextricably linked. They are right to think so. Consider poverty. On the island of Idjwi in Lake Kivu, which has been mostly insulated from the violence of the surrounding province of South Kivu, young people I met while conducting academic research last summer threatened to take up arms against local elites in an attempt to attract international attention, and thus income-generating projects, to their island. In the nearby town of Kavumu, on Sud Kivu's mainland, Congolese I spoke with told me they wanted access to development programs that would employ young people and keep them from joining armed groups.

Of course, violence prevents many development initiatives from succeeding in the first place, creating a vicious cycle.

The current political crisis has the potential to exacerbate all these issues. For good reason, Congolese citizens worry that the run-up to elections may generate additional violence—for instance, between protesters and the police or the army—and thus make their everyday lives even more difficult. The countdown to elections is also likely to worsen community tensions, because politicians are mobilizing their bases by promising them land, money, and jobs, pitting them against their opponents' supporters.

The best way to resolve these matters would be to install a national government that represents Congolese citizens and focuses on peace and development. But the negotiations in Kinshasa and the elections they may eventually produce are unlikely to lead to that outcome. There is little hope that elections, if they are held, will be free and fair, and the overwhelming majority of the elite jockeying for power place their own wealth and influence above the interests of their fellow citizens. The good news is that it is possible to promote peace and prosperity in Congo despite the country's political crisis.

Playing the guitar on Idjwi, November 2016.

A BETTER WAY

Activists, diplomats, and development workers usually try to address tensions in war and postwar contexts by supporting national elites and relying on foreign actors and external expertise. This approach has repeatedly failed in Congo, and at times it has even worsened the situation. As international interveners have emphasized sexual violence as one of the main consequences of the conflict in Congo, for example, some combatants have committed rapes in order to attract

international attention and push the government to the negotiating table.

There is a better way forward. In some parts of Congo, citizens have managed to address violence and poverty on their own—for example, by turning to local religious authorities or community organizations to mediate disputes, instead of to militias or the security forces. If international and nongovernmental organizations want to help fix Congo's problems, they should focus on backing these kinds of successful peacebuilding initiatives rather than concentrating almost exclusively on challenges such as troubled elections. Foreign interveners should fund, protect, and otherwise support exceptional individuals and organizations much more extensively. Local people have far more relevant knowledge, contacts, and means to resolve their own predicaments than outsiders usually believe they do—and more than provincial, national, and international actors will ever have. Moreover, ordinary Congolese trust traditional authorities much more than they trust national leaders, even when those local elites were not chosen democratically.

Getting to peace will require a change in attitude. To start, international interveners should acknowledge that bottom-up processes can be at least as effective at creating peace as top-down approaches are, if not more so. Building peace, democracy, and

Good outcomes such as democracy and peace do not always arrive together.

prosperity from the grassroots is a necessary complement to the ongoing efforts to resolve the crisis in Kinshasa.

Next, outside groups should recognize that good outcomes such as democracy and peace do not always arrive together. In fact, the push toward political liberalization has fueled violence in a number of other postwar countries, from Angola and Bosnia to Cambodia and El Salvador. In the short term, there may be a similar tradeoff between democracy and peace in Congo. Elections could be organized as quickly as possible, with the understanding that doing so may fuel violence. Alternatively, the time, resources, and effort required to organize elections could be used to address the root causes of Congo's conflict. Foreign activists and diplomats should not be the ones to choose between these courses. Instead, ordinary Congolese should. Diplomats, peacekeepers, and the staff members of international and nongovernmental organizations can certainly help. But to do so, they must look beyond elections to the local sources of Congo's problems.

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