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Congolese lessons for the Great Lakes

by Cristina Barrios

As elections approach in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Congo-Brazzaville, Uganda and Rwanda, the entire Great Lakes region is bracing itself for a potential of a spike in conflict.

In the DRC, by far the biggest and most populous country, the official calendar for elections at all levels was published on 12 February. Yet the incumbent, President Joseph Kabila, appears to be entrenching himself and his regime in order to cling to power despite a constitutional limit which should see him leave office by December 2016. His three-pronged strategy consists of: tightening his control over the armed forces, the *Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo* (FARDC), shrinking the political space, and wrangling with the international community.

At a time when Western policy towards Africa is largely preoccupied with halting the expansion of Islamist terror groups, there is a feeling of *déjà vu* and perhaps intervention-fatigue. Nevertheless, as the region and its electoral processes reach the agendas of the UN Security Council, the African Union, the European Parliament and other EU institutions, international engagement is essential to monitor – and possibly tame – any outbreak of violence.

Controlling the army

The building up of a Congolese national army and police force which would secure the country and its population may be one of Kabila's goals – so long as these security institutions support his regime. When he came to power in 2001, following the assassination of his father by a bodyguard, Kabila saw the armed forces – still the remnants of Mobutu's army – as a threat. Now he believes he can turn them into an asset. Through a string of new appointments, judicial investigations, re-drawn military regions and fresh operations, Kabila is clearly trying to seduce, as well as contain, certain members of the top brass.

Thanks to a variety of Security Sector Reform (SSR) initiatives, the FARDC is probably 'on its way' to becoming a regular army loyal to the state – but it is not there yet. For example, the EU mission, EUSEC DRC, has supported the drafting of laws and the creation of databases and biometric cards, and contributed to separating the payment system from the chain of command (a typical pillar of nepotism). EUSEC DRC has been able to make a difference through its focus on technical aspects and by establishing working relationships with Congolese partners and institutions for almost 10 years. Furthermore, by providing equipment and



improving military schools, the mission has created the right working conditions for SSR projects to be implemented by other countries. It is in Kabila's own interest, however, to limit SSR, so that he can play the army to his advantage and limit its capabilities – in the event the armed forces decide to turn against him.

For now, the FARDC is not a state army but rather a politico-military space in which many, including the president, can play power games. Commanders and troops alike pledge allegiance to specific individuals and factions, whose authority often relies on local patronage, networks and resource exploitation. This situation is not unique to the DRC – and it is not new: it is reminiscent of the state of affairs under Mobutu and his *Forces Armées Zairoises* whose mutinies and eventual disintegration caused him to lose power in a foreign-backed rebellion led by Laurent Kabila back in 1997. The 2003-2006 transition agreement foresaw the integration (financed by the international community) of warring armed groups into one FARDC.

But such 'reintegration packages' became a means to access power and funds while maintaining armed control of local spaces and troops. All this is problematic for SSR purposes. In 2009, for example, the well-organised (and Rwanda-backed) militia *Congrès national pour la défense du peuple* reintegrated into the FARDC very much on its own terms. It had a large say in determining amnesties, retained an independent chain of command, and ensured its deployment in areas rich in mineral resources. At 150,000 troops, however, the FARDC now needs to be consolidated – something which Kabila's instrumentalisation of SSR is not helping.

Finally, the FARDC is but one of the actors on the Congolese stage: groups of rebels (sometimes FARDC defectors, or allies) and neighbouring countries often intervene and alter the state's 'monopoly of force'. MONUSCO – the large UN peace-keeping mission with an annual budget of \$1.4 billion and up to 20,000 soldiers on the ground – also plays an important role. Operating under Chapter VII, it is mandated to protect civilians and support peace consolidation efforts, and now boasts an Intervention Brigade specifically tasked to neutralise armed groups in eastern Congo. For his part, President Kabila has a Republican Guard of 12,000 men with trusted commanders – mostly

from his region, Katanga – run from a private military cabinet nicknamed *la maison militaire*. These elite troops are now registered on a biometric database and have benefited from SSR, but they still answer directly to Kabila and not to the FARDC's *Chef d'Etat Major*.

Shrinking the political space

President Kabila's attempts to limit freedoms and prevent the mobilisation of civil society are clear. It is now impossible to access Facebook or Skype from Kinshasa, and internet access remains limited. The government also shut down social networks and stopped text-message services for mobile phones during a week of protests that the country witnessed in mid-January. These protests – against a bill that was perceived to allow for a potential delay to presidential elections— were especially heated in Goma, Bukavu and other cities with major universities such as Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, and Kisangani.

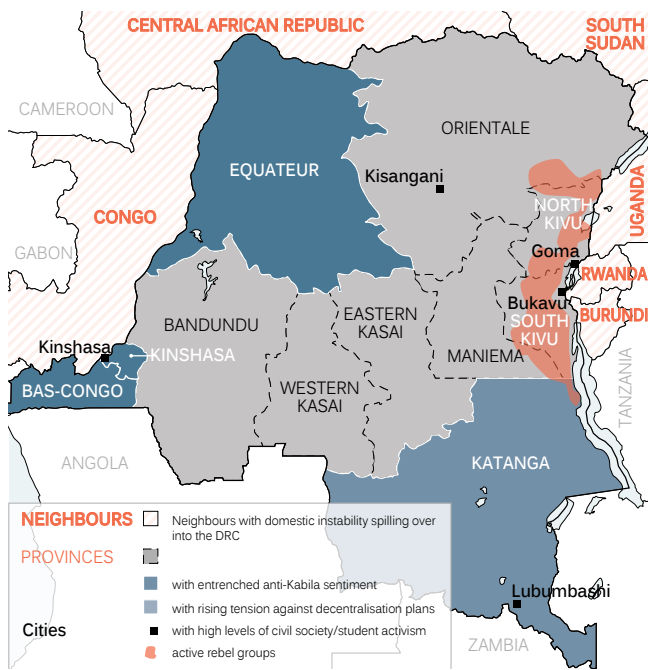
A prominent human rights activist in Goma and several journalists in the capital have disappeared in the last few months, and many more citizens are under surveillance. The Catholic Church, human rights activists, student movements and a variety of NGOs – collectively known as *les forces vives* of civil society – are currently warning of rising discontent across the country, notably in the provinces (Kinshasa, Equateur, Bas-Congo) which have historically voted against Kabila.

'The logistical challenges of this enormous country and the lack of political consensus over plans for decentralisation bode ill for the local and provincial polls.'

The political space, too, has been reduced – but through co-option rather than repression. Throughout his two terms in power, Kabila has manoeuvred so as to split the opposition, buy-off opponents and rule comfortably with a presidential majority coalition under a 'government of national unity'. The National Assembly houses representatives from almost 100 parties (including the weakened opposition party, the UDSP, with its 82 year-old leader Etienne Tshisekedi); none of which constitute a real political threat. Even the Senate has little credibility, since many of the representatives were co-opted by Kabila through bribes, and senators have already overstayed their tenure by three years following electoral delays.

However, it is uncertain whether Kabila will manage to stifle resistance much further. Some potential

DRC hotspots



Source: EUISS

presidential candidates could pose a real challenge to the incumbent, including Vital Kamerhe (a former ally) and the Sakharov Prize winner Dr Denis Mukwege. In Katanga, Kabila's traditional stronghold, tensions are rising over decentralisation plans (the resource-rich province is supposed to be divided into four smaller provinces) and power struggles continue between the governor, the vice-governor, and the regime. In fact, Katanga governor and businessman Moïse Katumbi is Kabila's most credible opponent nowadays. Alternatively, Kabila could choose a successor (maybe from his own family) in a scenario similar to that of Putin and Medvedev, but any new presidential candidate would need to gather their own momentum.

The recently disclosed electoral calendar foresees local and provincial elections in October 2015 and a presidential vote in November 2016. Most observers believe that Kabila will, for now, just play for time. The logistical challenges of this enormous country and the lack of political consensus over plans for decentralisation bode ill for the local and provincial polls. These elections may also spark additional localised conflicts on ethnic grounds.

Raising funds to cover the electoral process – estimated at \$1.1 billion – will be no small task. In 2006, donors covered the entire budget, with the EU as the main contributor (also through its CSDP operation EUFOR Kinshasa). The 2011 vote suffered from poor organisation and was heavily criticised for its lack of transparency and questionable results. It may thus prove necessary to push for the

presidential election to halt Kabila's plan to prolong his mandate – and Washington has already expressed its readiness to contribute to this particular process. Unfortunately, this will mean that bottom-up democracy – through local elections – is once again overlooked in the name of stability.

Wrangling with the international community

On 15 February, President Kabila chastised an audience of 18 foreign ambassadors he had summoned in Kinshasa with the statement “the Congolese state is not destined to be co-managed together with a club of diplomats”. This rhetoric, hinting at neo-colonialism and emphasising non-interference, is hardly new and is fully in line with Kabila's policy towards the international community ever since he was elected in 2006.

The DRC has repeatedly asked to be treated ‘as an adult’ at the UN Security Council and even blocked attempts to coordinate foreign assistance programmes by insisting on bilateral aid projects related to SSR. This antagonism exists despite the fact that the international community has supported Kabila since 2001 and generously provided about half of the DRC's budget for years through development aid.

This latent animosity between Kabila and the UN has now transformed into open hostility, especially *vis-à-vis* the UN Secretary General's Special Representative Martin Kobler and MONUSCO. Last October, the director of the UN Joint Human Rights Office, Scott Campbell, was officially declared *persona non grata* and expelled from the DRC. Although MONUSCO will soon see the arrival of new personnel in senior management, Kabila will no doubt try to isolate them as well.

More recently, a dispute has emerged over operations against the rebel group *Forces démocratiques pour la Libération du Rwanda* (FDLR) in the country's east. Although both MONUSCO and the Congolese government share the same goal of eliminating the group, the appointment of two generals by Kinshasa to head operations was rejected by the UN mission on the grounds that both are suspected of committing grave human rights abuses.

While this tussling with partners only erodes Kabila's legitimacy further, the international community itself suffers from a credibility deficit in the DRC. MONUSCO has been the target of criticism for its shortcomings in providing security to

civilians, and the Force Intervention Brigade, despite its robust mandate, has yet to become a game changer.

African partners also struggle to engage effectively with the DRC. The country is a member of the Economic Community of Central African States, but it does not interact much with Chad, Cameroon, or Gabon, the leading countries in this francophone institution. The Economic Community of Great Lakes Countries (Burundi, Rwanda, and the DRC) cannot be easily used to deal with security issues. Although the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) is considered a promising trans-regional endeavour, the DRC remains peripheral in its structures. South Africa's dominant role in SADC also poses a potential problem: this country is perceived in parts of the DRC as a new colonial power because of its political and economic clout, and its participation (together with Tanzania and Malawi) in MONUSCO's Force Intervention Brigade is being carefully monitored by the countries of the Great Lakes.

The African Union has never carried much weight in the DRC; at times it has sought to mediate between the country and the UN, with little success. Angola, however, is emerging as a crucial interlocutor – President Dos Santos is on good terms with Kabila, it has assisted the DRC on several occasions in the past (including during the 2011 elections), and it holds a seat in the UN Security Council for the period 2015-2017.

Instability without frontiers

The main security problem in the DRC is the forty-odd rebel groups which roam its eastern flank in the cross-border region with Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. A telling example is the now defeated rebel group M-23, which, having been supported by Rwanda, is currently 'hosted' in Uganda, from where it is negotiating its return to the DRC.

Alliances are highly volatile, notably amongst Mayi Mayi groups and rebels and military officials from all four countries. One of the strongest groups active in the DRC is still the FDLR, a group of 1,500-2,000 men led by Rwandans who have kept the Hutu animosity towards the Tutsi alive since the 1994 genocide. The fight against the FDLR is difficult: combatants have mingled with civilians in pockets of Congolese territory for over two decades. Moreover, in the past, Congolese FARDC commanders have often colluded with the FDLR in order to exploit natural resources and resist Kigali's incursions.

In the Great Lakes region, however, it is not only the DRC's domestic troubles which are spilling across borders. The Republic of Congo recently expelled thousands of DRC citizens from Brazzaville (just across the Congo river from Kinshasa), igniting social, economic and political tensions. Conflict in the Central African Republic has led to thousands of refugees fleeing into the poverty-stricken northern DRC. South Sudan and Uganda both have porous borders with the DRC, and armed movements (including the Lord's Resistance Army and splinters of South-Sudanese rebel groups) and traffickers operate unhindered in this part of the country. Rwanda's concerns with its own security have often caused it to meddle in Congolese affairs – and while election-related instability in Burundi may not spread directly to Rwanda, it already affects South Kivu in the DRC.

Think regional, act regional

President Kabila is pursuing his plan, slowly but surely, to imbed his regime. He is seeking to minimise the chances that the military will turn against him; to stifle opposition from other parties and civil society; and to break free of donor pressure. As the elections approach, tensions will mount across the country, possibly leading to acts of violent repression by security forces. Other African leaders are also closely monitoring the situation in the DRC, and they will draw lessons accordingly.

As was always the case, the security of the countries of the Great Lakes is a regional affair. However, the implementation of the regionally agreed 2013 Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework is currently stalled. And MONUSCO's almost full redeployment to eastern Congo (where conflict is heaviest) may have created a vacuum in Kinshasa, the hub of political life.

Coordinated diplomatic initiatives by special envoys (including from the EU and the US) may be able to make a difference and contain the spread of violence across the region. Such diplomacy, combined with careful support for the process leading up to the presidential elections, may help – in the DRC and beyond. Indeed, targeting only Kabila and the DRC will not suffice when all Great Lakes countries face the potential problem of unconstitutional extensions of presidential mandates.

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