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A new hope for Congo?

For the first time in history, an opposition candidate has been elected president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Read this interview in German.

The result of the presidential elections in DR Congo is considered sensational. Why?

For the first time in the history of DR Congo an opposition candidate has been elected as the new president. Since independence in 1960, the country has never had a peaceful transfer of power resulting from political elections. In that sense you can certainly deem it sensational. The winner, and therefore the future president, is Félix Tshisekedi.

There's only one round of voting and the biggest share of the vote decides who becomes president. Tshisekedi was declared the winner of the election with 38.75 per cent, Martin Fayulu from another opposition coalition received 34.83 per cent according to electoral authorities, and Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary, the preferred candidate of the incumbent president, came in third place with 23.84 per cent. The turnout was 47.56 per cent.

Who is Félix Tshisekedi?

Félix Tshisekedi is the head of the largest opposition party UDPS, the Union for Democracy and Social Progress. His father Étienne Tshisekedi was the charismatic leader of the opposition for decades, both against the dictator Mobutu, who was in power from 1982 to 1997, and against his successor, Laurent Kabila, the leader of one of the many militias that, with the help of neighbouring Rwanda, chased Mobutu out of office. Laurent Kabila was murdered in 2001 by one of his bodyguards. His son Joseph Kabila, then 29 years old, has governed the country since then. On 19 January 2019, he will now hand over responsibility to Félix Tshisekedi.

Did the elections go smoothly?

Not at all, but in comparison to previous election campaigns, most recently in 2011, they proceeded much more calmly – by Congolese standards. However, the election campaign was marked by various obstructions of the opposition's election campaigns. The top electoral commission refused to allow important opposition candidates to run in the presidential elections. Election observers from non-African counties were not permitted to work in DR Congo.

As the 'crown prince' of the incumbent president, Ramazani Shadary had the state apparatus' generous political and material support. 100,000 voting machines with touch screens from abroad were supposed to be available for casting votes in this enormous, sometimes downright impassable country. After a big fire at the electoral commission a few weeks before the election date, 8,000 of these machines were burned, in addition to numerous vehicles and election documents. In some provinces the governors prohibited or hindered the opposition from working and in three other regions in the East no voting took place at all for security reasons. On several occasions there were riots, deaths and injuries.

Does the Congolese population strike you as predominantly optimistic after the surprising election result?

There are also critical voices, such as the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church is one of the most important powers in DR Congo. Its bishops' conference (CENCO) disputes the accuracy of the election result. The church deployed some 4,000 election observers across the country. According to the election observers' reports, the national electoral commission's figures are questionable.

The defeated opposition candidate Martin Fayulu may appeal against the official election result. He accuses Tshisekedi, the winner and future president, of having made an arrangement with the regime. Fayulu had refused to contact Kabila or to deal with him at all. Tshisekedi and his election alliance took a softer approach. In their own words, they do not see Kabila as an enemy, rather they accept him as a counterpart in preparing for a democratically legitimate transfer of power.

So why does the result call for optimism nonetheless?

As in many other central African nations, it would have been possible in DR Congo that serious electoral fraud would be used in favour of the government candidate. That obviously didn't happen. The president's preferred candidate, Shadary, hardly stood a chance due to his unpopularity among the Congolese population.

The view of the election result abroad, that of the African Union and

the UN remains cautious. The handover of power to the opposition representative is not yet complete. As things stand, however, it's hard to imagine Kabila's government now, just days before the successor is sworn in, suddenly rejecting the decision of the electoral commission, which is completely dominated by the regime. The pressure from abroad and within DR Congo would leave little scope for that.

What happens now?

On 18 January 2019 at the latest, the Constitutional Court will announce the official result of the elections, including the parliamentary election that took place at the same time. The composition of the parliament will not make it easy for the new President-elect Tshisekedi to form a government. But eventually it should be possible. The office of president in DR Congo traditionally offers vast opportunities for forming majorities.

The departing President Kabila has to be provided with guarantees for his and his family members' personal and material security. Congolese law grants him a seat in the Senate for life.

What are the new president's most urgent tasks?

On the domestic front, the coalition partners need to be involved in forming a government. And Tshisekedi must strive to reach a settlement with Martin Fayulu's supporters. In addition, there's the central task of bringing order to the army and the security forces so that the influence of private armies and militias can also be reduced. He has to carry out reforms in the state administration machinery and ensure a continued supply of civil servants and employees, which has so far only been rudimentary. If not, the steps necessary for modernising the nation and credible measures against the widespread corruption and self-enrichment will not be possible. The Congolese population expects policies oriented towards the citizens' concerns and interests from the new government. This is what Tshisekedi was elected for.

In terms of foreign policy, relations with the European Union need to be normalised. The EU ambassador was expelled from the country in December 2018 due to the EU sanctions against Shadary and other members of the Kabila government. Diplomatic relations with Belgium have been put on ice. The mandate for the UN peacekeeping force MONUSCO has to be renegotiated. Kabila's government had decided that MONUSCO had to withdraw from DR Congo in 2019.

Relationships with other neighbouring countries, which suffer from the instability in DR Congo and have taken in many refugees, have much room for improvement.

The interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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