DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 07.12.2023 | Stephanie Jänsch

Hope, struggles and the call for true leadership

In the upcoming elections, the Congolese are driven by the wish for a leader whose love for their country will spurt political action

On 20 December 2023, Africa's second-largest country, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), will hold presidential and legislative national, provincial, as well as municipal elections under challenging conditions.

For many countries worldwide, elections are a time in which tangible tensions go hand in hand with hopes for a better future yet to come. In the Eastern DRC, this hope is deeply connected with a longing for peace and a more prosperous future. Despite a multitude of local, national, regional and international peace efforts, the security situation has recently continued to deteriorate. This development evokes severe problems for the upcoming elections, with challenges emerging on multiple fronts at the same time.

According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the number of internally displaced people has reached 6.9 million.

Firstly, the persisting occupation of certain areas in North Kivu by the *Mouvement du 23-Mars* (M23) excludes many Congolese from participating in the upcoming elections. M23's offensive started at the end of 2021. Officially, the group, which is allegedly backed by Rwanda, demands the implementation of the 2013 peace deal (a revised version of the initial 2009 peace agreement) and claims to defend Congolese Tutsi from ethnic-based violence. In reality, however, it has also been 'leaving behind a growing trail of war crimes against civilians'. In areas under its control, it has successfully set up parallel administrations and blocked activities by the Independent
National Electoral Commission (CENI), which is preparing the electoral process. Consequently,

carrying out elections in these areas remains elusive. In a recent report published by the International Crisis Group (ICG) the authors warn that more than a million citizens are excluded from the elections.

Secondly, while much of the international attention has recently focussed on the ongoing war in Ukraine and the unfolding Israel-Hamas war, the DRC has faced 'one of the largest internal displacement and humanitarian crises in the world'. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) the number of internally displaced people has reached 6.9 million. Voting in Congo's camps for internally displaced people poses challenges. CENI had engaged in registering voters in these shelters, but despite this, many were still excluded when registration closed in April 2023. For others, especially women, who live outside of these camps, participating in the election may simply be too dangerous. Due to rising insecurities, many women may not be able to vote in a safe manner, especially if polling stations are far from the relative safety of their homes.

Rising repression and political violence

Thirdly, political tensions and repression have recently been rising. In July 2023, the murder of Chérubin Okende, the spokesman for the opposition party *Ensemble pour la Republique*, caused a nation-wide shock. While President Félix Tshisekedi promised that this crime would not go unpunished, the party's candidate Moïse Katumbi spoke of a targeted political assassination that was symptomatic of the rising climate of oppression.

Just weeks later, Stanis Bujakera's arrest sparked outrage beyond the DRC. The reporter, who works for *Jeune Africa*, was arrested at the airport in Kinshasa in September 2023. He is accused of spreading misinformation regarding Okende's murder in an article that did not even name him as the author. Despite national mobilisation campaigns, which have been supported by international organisations such as Reporters without Borders and prominent voices like Samantha Power and Achille Mbembe, Stanis remains imprisoned. That being said, many Congolese are painfully aware that he is not the only one. According to *Journaliste en Danger,* there have been more than 500 attacks against the media since Tshisekedi gained power in 2019. At least five journalists have been killed.

These developments certainly limit the hope for a democratic and peaceful election. Yet, a growing number of young voices continue to

make political demands. Organisations like *La Ligue des Electeurs* have supported a broader awareness of the democratic rights enshrined in the Congolese constitution for every citizen. Furthermore, a recent initiative called '*Ma voix n'est pas à vendre*' (My voice is not for sale), created by an alliance of members from civil society and different youth movements, aims at 'encouraging responsible citizenship'. At the same time, doing this kind of work and political activism has become increasingly dangerous. This is especially true for areas under the '*État de siège*', a form of martial law active in North Kivu and Ituri. Here, the military took control over civilian duties and local administration in 2021. Military elites have abused their new power to squeeze civil liberties, restricting freedom of expression and applying lethal force against people organising demonstrations.

Those pointing towards challenges in the electoral process have also come under attack. In August 2023, 12 activists from the youth collective LUCHA organised a spontaneous demonstration. They protested the distribution of illegible enrolment cards. If provided with unsuitable cards, many voters in rural areas have to travel far to demand new voting cards. However, going on this journey is potentially life-threatening given the presence of violent groups such as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and others in the respective regions. While initially, the protesters who pointed towards these challenges got arrested, CENI now recognised their critique and announced measures. In addition, President Tshisekedi admitted evident shortcomings regarding the '*État de siège*' and consequently called for a 'gradual transitional arrangement at the end of which this exceptional situation should come to an end'.

International silence

Despite these challenges, the international response has, so far, been rather weak. The recent ICG report claims that overall, 'the DRC's regional and international partners have remained relatively silent about the shortcomings of the current electoral process'. According to the report, international partners, including the European Union, could become much more active in, for instance, supporting CENI to adapt transparency measures or providing assistance to domestic election observers. Given the painful experiences Congolese citizens have had with past elections, many are concerned that 'the DRC's long legacy of electoral malpractice will endure in 2023'. Yet, even though organisations like the EU have invested financially to tackle the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the DRC, many Congolese feel that overall, the international community has turned its back on them. The LUCHA-activist Bienvenue Matumo recently denounced that especially economic and political elites from China, the US and Europe view the mineral-rich

DRC first and foremost as a zone of exploitation. He deplores that, despite being engaged in the DRC, these stakeholders primarily fight for their economic interests without much regard for other issues: 'and in a zone of exploitation, one doesn't care what happens there'.

During my time in the DRC, I repeatedly heard the Congolese wish for a leader who truly loves their country.

Looking inward, some Congolese find hope in the announcement of Dr. Denis Mukwege's run for president. The fact that the winner of the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize has not been involved in the formal political arena but has demonstrated his fight for the Congolese people through his medical work makes him a figure of hope for many. And yet, he is also not uncontested: some see him as too closely allied with Western powers, and others even see in him 'a hyena in a lamb skin'. During my time in the DRC, I repeatedly heard the Congolese wish for a leader who truly loves their country and who is willing to transform this love into political action serving the people. It is certainly not for an outsider to judge who of the presidential candidates matches this description best, but my hope is that the Congolese will get the leader they certainly deserve.



Stephanie Jänsch

Stephanie Jänsch is a PhD-researcher enrolled in the Graduate School 'Democratising Security in Turbulent Times' in Hamburg, Germany. Her research focuses on protest and practices of resistance against United Nations peacebuilding operations.