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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Stellungnahme / comment

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ansorg, N. (2018). *The DRC is still in crisis but there is a way out*. London: The Conversation Trust. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-57108-8>

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The DRC is still in crisis but there is a way out

April 11, 2018 2.03pm BST



Citizens protest on the streets of Kinshasa in the DRC. Robert Carrubba/EPA-EFE

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After many months of upheaval, the Democratic Republic of Congo is set for yet another year of political struggle and internal conflict. Current President Joseph Kabila remains the main cause of the unrest. He reached the end of his final term in December 2016 yet refuses to step down. His government continues to find reasons to delay elections which ought to have been held shortly after the conclusion of Kabila's term.

The latest election date has been set for December 2018, although it is doubtful that the government will hold the poll. It has already pointed to apparent logistical and financial obstacles to a December election. This has become an ongoing excuse to keep Kabila in power.

Meanwhile, DRC citizens are increasingly unsatisfied with the government. They have repeatedly taken to the streets of the capital city Kinshasa to call for elections and Kabila's resignation. Security forces continue to quell those protests and crack down on political activists. State operatives have on several occasions shut down the internet.

How to end the crisis

There's also continuing violence in other parts of the country including North Kivu and Kasai. The people here have suffered tremendously, sometimes at the hands of their own government forces.

The United Nations peacekeeping force, which is currently the largest in the world, has been unable to stabilise the country. As a result, more than 4.5 million people have been internally displaced and more than 3 million are at risk of starvation.

Because the situation is so dire, the only way out might be another attempt at mediation. The highly influential Catholic Church of the DRC (Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Congo) attempted to mediate a deal between Kabila and the opposition in 2016. It withdrew from its role as mediator in March 2017 after talks stalled. The church was pushing for what it called the **Saint Sylvestre Political Agreement**. If this had been implemented the DRC would have held elections before the end of 2017.

But the agreement could still form the basis of a more effective mediation strategy to go hand in hand with increased political and economic pressure. Indeed, African leaders have steadily increased their pressure on Kabila to step down. As a consequence the prospects for elections have improved slightly. What is needed now is more concerted action and a renewed regional and international engagement to push for the end of Kabila's political oppression, and for elections to be held.

This push should be coordinated by the African Union and the South African Development Community so that any future interventions would be homegrown. This approach would likely appease Kabila, who has been known to accuse the United Nations of foreign interference.

These diplomatic and political efforts should be accompanied by increased political and economic sanctions from the European Union, the United States and the United Nations. Top Congolese officials, including Kabila's family, are already subject to a number of sanctions. But they remain the main beneficiaries of Congo's vast mineral wealth.

Through a complex web of companies, Kabila and his cronies have managed to sidestep sanctions that target them individually. I would argue, then, that sanctions against those companies and their industries would send a much stronger message to the government.

When it comes to the election, the government needs to be open about the amount of funding that is needed for the electoral process. If further funding is required, international donors may have to step up their fundraising efforts.

And as the country heads towards a poll, attention should also be drawn to the DRC's lively civil society and its potential to mobilise ordinary citizens. Grassroots initiatives can reflect the will of the people far better than the political elites in Kinshasa. Civil society organisations must also be involved in the preparation process for the elections as a means to check the political excesses of the Kabila regime.


Action for the sake of the people

The DRC's troubles have largely been caused by the political class: on one hand a president who refuses to relinquish power, and on the other a divided opposition that has been unable to challenge

the government. With more than 400 political parties registered in the country, the political landscape is highly fractured.

The political class continues to haggle over power at the expense of the Congolese people. It is well known that for the elite, the DRC's vast mineral resources are more valuable than its citizens. Those resources are at the centre of the battle for political leadership. While the Kabila family, its cronies and a handful of multinational corporations benefit from the country's natural wealth, millions of people go to bed hungry every night.

Kabila controls the country's resources and many suspect that the prospect of losing control over these industries might be the real reason for the delay in stepping down.

Democratic Republic of Congo Democracy in Africa Joseph Kabila Governance in Africa Peace & Security 

DRC Elections



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Nadine is Lecturer in International Conflict Analysis and a Research Fellow at the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies in Hamburg. She is currently co-leading a project on "Security sector reform and the stability of post-war peace". She has previously worked as Post-Doctoral Researcher for Grants and Impact at the School of Politics and International Relations, as Project Coordinator and Research Fellow in the project "Institutions for Sustainable Peace" at the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies Hamburg (2012-2015) and as Acting Junior Professor for Development Politics and Politics of Africa at Bayreuth University (2014-2015). Her research focuses on institutional reform in post-conflict societies, in particular security sector reform, the role of international state and non-state actors in these reform processes, and the conditions for establishing peace in divided and post-conflict societies. She uses a mixed-methods approach to explore dynamics and conditions of peacebuilding in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

Experience

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