

Run-off ballot in the Congo

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On August 20, the final result of the presidential election held July 30 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo was announced. The current head of state, Joseph Kabila, won 45 percent of the vote and his rival, the former rebel leader and current vice president, Jean-Pierre Bemba, 20 percent. The election turnout was 70 percent.

The result means that the two rival candidates are obliged to take part in a fresh vote on October 29, since neither acquired the 50 percent necessary for outright victory.

Two weeks after the polling stations closed it was already clear that the ballot was overshadowed by vote manipulation. A number of the candidates for the presidency complained of electoral fraud. Fifteen of the 33 candidates for the Congo's highest public office signed a joint statement complaining of "substantial irregularities" in the ballot.

Their statement declares: "The presidential and parliamentary elections have not taken place under the minimum conditions of transparency and can by no means bring about a new democratic order." The statement goes on to accuse the international community of concealing irregularities "in the manner of accomplices."

The statement has been signed by, among others, Science Minister Gérard Kamanda, Solidarity Minister Catherine Nzuzi wa Mbombo and Guy Patrice Lumumba, a son of the Congo's first government head, who was murdered following the country's independence from Belgium in 1960.

The candidates complain that voters were bribed and excessive ballot sheets had appeared in the country's capital of Kinshasa. Victory in Kinshasa, which plays an important role in a country that lacks a developed infrastructure and has a weak central power, is of crucial importance in elections.

However, in the capital city, which houses some 12 percent of all voters, Kabila is regarded as "not very popular." The assumption is that so-called "dead souls" (phony ballots) were used to prop up Kabila's rule.

Even prior to the election, supporters of Kabila's main

rival, Jean-Pierre Bemba, had already accused UN foreign observers of coming to the country only to defend Kabila's grip on power.

The electoral committee has announced that five election helpers have been arrested on suspicion of fraud. For their part, European Union observers have criticized the chaotic way in which the elections were held in some regions.

Sporadic conflicts erupted between the police and opposition forces following the initial ballot at the end of July, and recent reports have emerged of police using disproportionate force against demonstrators. The police conduct their patrols in convoys, and are armed with rifles and rocket launchers which they occasionally make use of.

Various relief organizations and NGOs, such as Doctors Without Borders and Amnesty International, have accused the Congolese military and police of human rights violations.

Shortly before the announcement of the election results, neighbouring Angola, which maintains friendly relations with Kabila, strengthened its contingent of troops on the border with the Congo. A representative of the United Nations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo told the press agency Reuters that the Angolan army had sent four battalions, including helicopters and armoured vehicles, to the border area.

Success in the upcoming ballot for the two contenders depends on currying favour and winning maximum support from the other presidential candidates. As has been past practice, this can involve the allocation of concessions for the exploitation of the country's enormous mineral resources, the promise of ministerial positions, or outright corruption.

Even before the ballot takes place, however, the real victor is certain. A number of reports have been published which, according to the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, make clear "that the Western powers and the International Monetary Fund are seeking to exert massive influence on Congolese policy after the elections. They have already

met several times in Kinshasa—in the absence of representatives of the Congo. At these meetings an obligatory ‘market-orientated economic program’ was developed, which the new government would be obliged to follow. Otherwise, the country will be threatened with the withdrawal of financial support.”

Not only is the Congo rich in raw materials, it is of strategic significance for all of Central Africa. It possesses the world’s largest deposits of copper as well as enormous deposits of cobalt, diamonds and other precious metals. Just one area of extraction in Katanga in the east is estimated to be worth \$100 billion at current market prices.

This is the background to the current mission being conducted by troops from the European Union, Germany and the UN. Their task is mainly to secure the rule of “their” candidate, Joseph Kabila, who in the past has offered cheap mining concessions to Western and international companies, which have made their own substantial contribution to exploiting the country. Despite its enormous riches, the Congo remains one of the poorest countries in the world.

According to Joseph’s twin sister Jeanette, the Kabila family finances itself through its “lucrative business with national mining concessions.”

The current conflicts in the country have their roots in the dissatisfaction with this state of affairs of Kabila’s rivals, who are critical of international efforts to maintain him in power and are demanding their pound of flesh. Recent days have witnessed violent clashes between the 15,000-strong presidential guard of the 36-year-old Kabila and the militias commanded by the 43-year-old Bemba.

Bemba also ranks as one of the richest men in the country and has a fortune estimated at several hundred million dollars. His father, a businessman, made his fortune under the former dictator Sese Seko Mobutu. His son invested in the portable radio industry, aviation and private television stations. One of his sisters is married to a son of Mobutu.

Following Mobutu’s overthrow by Kabila’s father, Laurent Désiré, Bemba left the capital to take over the leadership of a rebel army supported by Uganda. His army is said to have financed itself through illegal trade in diamonds and is alleged to have committed numerous war crimes in 2002 and 2003. Bemba was condemned in Belgium to one year in prison on charges of slave trading, and further charges have been lodged against him by the International Human Rights Leagues (FIDH) with the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

Following the murder of his father, Joseph Kabila succeeded in settling the civil war by bringing Bemba and other rebel leaders into government as vice presidents. As the shootings after the first round of the current election show, however, the truce between competing factions is utterly fragile. It continues only if all of the competing cliques and the regional and great powers backing them are recompensed. This entire process has little to do with democracy or providing for the interests and needs of the population.

The public depiction of the German armed forces and the international community as supporters of the people of the Congo in their search for security, democracy and prosperity has been exposed as farcical by a United Nations report.

The report states that “regardless of the support for the elections in the Central African country, thousands of civilians there die from malnutrition and illness every week. Until now, the donor countries have made available only a third of the \$668 million requested by the UN in February for the improvement of the situation in the Congo. According to UN data, this sum is needed to supply millions of humans with food, water, health and welfare services, education and security.”

Just \$330 million has been transferred to the Congo for humanitarian assistance so far. The election, on the other hand, including an international military presence, is costing its international backers approximately \$400 million. The money is being invested to guarantee that Kabila hangs onto power and the great powers can continue their exploitation of the rich resources of the country.



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