

Unrest in the Congo: Political turmoil rocks Kinshasa

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Marital law was declared Monday in the capital city of Kinshasa, Congo, after Congo's main opposition parties made a public call for mass demonstrations against the government, declaring their fears that President Joseph Kabila will refuse to leave office when his term ends in December.

The electoral commission was set to announce a date for elections on Monday, but has said that it will not be possible to hold them in November.

Kabila has been president for 15 years and has served the maximum of two terms allowed by the constitution. His presidency is set to expire on December 20. He took power in 2001, succeeding his father, President Laurent Kabila, who was assassinated.

Several headquarters of various political opposition parties were attacked with grenades and machinegun fire. The office of the Union for Democracy and Social Progress, the largest political party opposing the current Kabila government, was set ablaze, incinerating several people inside alive.

Also attacked were the headquarters of the Forces of Union and Solidarity (Fonus) party and the headquarters of the Lumumbist Progressive Movement (MLP). Witnesses report the attackers were soldiers in uniform.

Several people have been reported killed in the unrest, and much of the city was smoldering, with buildings on fire, as well as scores of cars set ablaze. Hundreds of police were called out to quell the violence.

Opposition sources put the death toll at 50, while witnesses declared that police opened fire into crowds. There have been reports of mass arrests and beatings of demonstrators carried out by police.

On Thursday, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, condemned the Kabila government, stating that he was particularly shocked at reports that some men in uniform took a direct part in some of the attacks against the headquarters of six

opposition political parties.

While it appears that that the unrest in Kinshasa has abated, the threat of renewed chaos has not been resolved.

The current political unrest is just the latest manifestation of deep going instability within the Congolese political setup. In May of last year, opposition political parties staged a rally in Kinshasa against the Kabila government, sparking a violent government crackdown and resulting in scores killed.

The political forces opposed to Kabila are led by various wealthy Congolese businessmen, former Kabila allies, and individuals who formerly served in the Mobutu Sese Seko dictatorship.

One of the leading candidates for president, Moise Katumbi, a wealthy businessman and former governor of Katanga, with previous close ties to the Kabila regime, called for demonstrations for Monday, stating on his Twitter account: "I call for peaceful demonstrations everywhere in the country to ask for elections!"

Katumbi fled the country last May after a warrant was issued for his arrest. He was a one-time confidante of Kabila, but the two have since had a falling out. He has been sentenced in absentia to three years in prison after being convicted of corruption in a land sale deal, a charge he denies.

Katumbi's main claim to fame is as the owner of the Congolese football club TP Mazembe, which has won several championships and is a major source of pride for many Congolese. Katumbi is the most favored candidate from the main opposition parties.

Étienne Tshisekedi also backed the call for demonstrations. Tshisekedi is the leader of the presidential candidate of the Union for Democracy and Social Progress opposition party. Now aged 83, Tshisekedi has a long and sordid history; he served various ministerial positions in the reviled US-backed dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko, including as Sese

Seko's prime minister, during the period of the regime's worst crimes.

As finance minister for Sese Seko, Tshisekedi oversaw the expropriation of vast sums of wealth from the country that were funneled into the accounts of international financial interests exploiting the Congo as well as those of Sese Seko and his ruling clique. Tshisekedi also oversaw the savage repression of political opponents of the dictatorship.

Congo has had a long and brutal history, beginning with Belgian colonial rule in the 19th century. After a bloody and protracted fight, in 1960 Congo gained independence from Belgian colonialism. The leader of the anti-colonial struggle, Patrice Lumumba, emerged as Congo's first democratically elected prime minister in 1960.

Less than satisfied with the election results, Belgium, with aid from Washington and the Central Intelligence Agency, set out to remove Lumumba from power. Lumumba's demands that Congo's significant mineral wealth be controlled by the Congo were considered his death sentence by Belgium and Washington.

After being arrested, Lumumba and two of his closest advisers were removed from their prison cell in the dark of night and shot to death by a firing squad.

This barbaric act brought to power the brutal dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko, which received significant support and approval from Washington and Belgium. The Mobutu dictatorship carried out the some of the worst crimes of any post-colonial African regime. The dictatorship ruled the Congo until 1997, when Mobutu was forced to flee after a rebellion led by Laurent Kabila, then a rebel military leader. This led to the Congo War, which lasted from 1996 to 2003 and resulted in millions of deaths.

For its part, Washington indicated its displeasure with the Kabila regime in June when the Obama administration threatened to impose sanctions against the country if Kabila refuses to leave office. Washington has warned Kabila not to seek a third term, with the usual vacuous platitudes about "respecting the constitution."

The real concern from Washington is for the vast mineral wealth of the Congo, and the maintenance of a reliable and pliant regime in Kinshasa to facilitate the exploitation of these resources. The chaos that would ensue from a recalcitrant regime that refuses to leave office is something Washington wishes to avoid, as this would disrupt the flow of resources and profits.

Another point of contention between Washington and Kinshasa is the Kabila government's business dealings

with China. By reaffirming its dominance through AFRICOM and US military alliances, Washington is aiming to halt the growing economic influence of China on the African continent.

China has invested heavily in Congo, particularly in the mining sector and copper.

Congo is the largest country in sub-Saharan Africa and one of the most socially and economically polarized. It is home to some of the largest deposits of mineral wealth in the world, including resources used in the manufacture of electronics such as computers and mobile phones, coveted by wealthy Western interests.

The Congolese economy has been drastically affected by the sharp drop in commodities indices on world markets in recent years; the fall in the price of copper (Congo is Africa's largest exporter of copper) has left the Congolese economy reeling. The country's oil and mining sectors account for some 98 percent of Congo's exports. Claiming fears of hyperinflation, Kabila is projected to cut the budget this year by as much as 30 percent, slashing spending for public services and other essential government functions.

Congo is controlled by a wealthy corrupt ruling class, while the vast majority of Congolese live in dire poverty, with millions across the country having no access to clean water and enough food to eat. The total mineral wealth and natural resources of the Congo are estimated to be worth some \$24 trillion, but this vast wealth is completely out of reach for the majority of Congolese.

The living conditions are miserable for the masses of Congolese. Fewer than 25 of the population has access to sanitary facilities, and fewer than half access to clean water. This lack of basic sanitation results in annual outbreaks of cholera and other air and water borne diseases, such as dysentery, which affect millions of people. Two out of every five child deaths are caused by malaria, which afflicts nearly 7 million Congolese.

The prevalence of these conditions and the widespread misery for the majority of the population in a country with such vast wealth and resources stands as an indictment of both world capitalism and Africa's national bourgeoisie.



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