

Felix Tshisekedi declared victor in disputed presidential election in Congo

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On Thursday, after a nearly two-week delay in releasing the results of the December 30 poll, Congo's electoral authority, the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) declared Felix Tshisekedi, leader of the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS), the victor in the hotly contested election to determine the successor to President Joseph Kabila, who has ruled Congo for 18 years.

Ahead of CENI's announcement Thursday, heavily-armed riot police were deployed outside the electoral commission's headquarters in Kinshasa.

Speaking on the eve of his victory before a crowd of supporters Tshisekedi gave an indication of a behind the scenes agreement with the Kabila regime, lavishing praise on the outgoing president and declaring Kabila "an important political partner." Notably, Tshisekedi's running mate was Vital Kamerhe, a former Kabila campaign manager.

The surprising announcement of a Tshisekedi victory was followed by an outcry from opposition candidate Martin Fayulu, who called the electoral commission's decision an "electoral swindle." On Saturday, Fayulu, a former Exxon-Mobil executive, filed a challenge with the Congo Constitutional Court requesting a manual recount of all votes cast in the poll.

Voting data compiled by the Episcopal Conference of Congo (CENCO), a Catholic bishop's group, who placed 41,000 election observers at polling stations around the country, disputed the result certified by CENI.

In a statement to media regarding its assessment, the bishops declared, "The government's decision does not correspond to the data collected by our observation mission." While not publicly naming Fayulu the winner, several diplomats and reporters, as well as the Kabila government, have stated that the CENCO privately informed them that they had determined Fayulu was the victor.

CENI's declaration of Tshisekedi as the winner raises serious questions regarding the integrity of the poll. According to pre-election poll data, Fayulu had taken a clear lead over all other candidates in the contest. In comparison, pre-election polling placed Tshisekedi far behind. Poll data showed that Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary, Kabila's handpicked candidate, occupied a distant third place in the contest.

The three candidates, occupying the wealthy social layer comprising the Congolese bourgeoisie, represented a choice between various strategies for advancing the interests of the ruling capitalist elite. Regardless of who won, not one of these parasites could be expected to improve the miserable social conditions experienced by the Congolese masses.

The grotesque affair of the election itself, representing nothing that could be called democratic, was conducted amid the atmosphere of a quasi-police state. A significant presence of armed security forces patrolled city streets, with several mobilized to polling stations in a blatant display of intimidation to voters and poll workers alike. The Catholic Church reported 115 instances in which its election observers were forcibly removed by police at several polling locations across the country.

A young man at a polling station in the town of Walungu in eastern Kivu province was shot to death by a policeman after a brief altercation occurred in which the policeman accused the youth of voter fraud. Several voters who witnessed the shooting retaliated against the policeman and beat him to death.

In addition to the heavyhanded police repression, voters throughout the country were frustrated by long delays consisting of several hours before the opening of many polling stations. There were several reports of ballot box stuffing and tampering, as well as the theft of uncounted ballots in several districts and outright vote buying.

Electronic voting machines were utilized for the first

time throughout the country, leaving many voters who had never even used a computer with little instruction in the machines' use. Additionally, many areas of the country experience frequent power outages, and on the day of the poll, electrical blackouts caused voters to suffer significant delays. Further, the Catholic Church's election observers noted 544 cases throughout the country of malfunctioning voting machines.

Fitting with the anti-democratic character of the ruling government, ahead of the poll on December 30, the Kabila regime cut off internet access nationwide, under the bogus pretext of "ensuring security and peace."

Furthermore, the Kabila government explicitly barred 1 million voters from casting a ballot in the North Kivu province, an area facing a renewed outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus. Kabila's ridiculous claim behind the imposition of the vote restriction was the possibility that afflicted residents could infect voters and worsen the pandemic. Notably, North Kivu province is a base of significant support for Fayulu. Furious protests erupted against the ban in the North Kivu cities of Beni and Butembo.

Angered by the voting restriction, Jacob Salamu, a 24-year old first-time voter and resident of Beni, expressed the widespread contempt felt by the Congolese masses toward the government when he told reporters, "We do not have Ebola. Kabila is worse than Ebola."

Washington and the capitals of Europe are observing the developments closely in the Congo. At a United Nations Security Council meeting on Friday, Washington, along with France, Belgium, and Germany requested CENI to release its voting data. For Washington's part, they have kept a watchful eye over the elections, having deployed 80 troops to nearby Gabon for the purpose of "protecting US assets" in the event of political turmoil arising from the elections.

Both France and Belgium challenged the Kabila government regarding the poll's official outcome, calling the declaration of Tshisekedi inconsistent with election observers' findings and stating that Fayulu appears to be the true winner.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian told France's CNews television: "It really seems that the declared results ... are not consistent with the true results. On the face of it, Mr Fayulu was the leader coming out of these elections."

Kabila government spokesman Lambert Mende lashed back at the statement of Le Drian, retorting, "France has nothing to do with the vote in the Congo, and if Mr. Le

Drian thinks Congo is a province or colony of France, he just needs to name the president of Congo."

The Southern African Development Community (SADC), comprising of a collection of southern African nations including the Congo, moved to soothe political tensions by suggesting to the Tshisekedi and Fayulu factions to enter into a power-sharing agreement. Weighing most heavily on the minds of the SADC countries and the Western capitalists in Europe and the United States is their fear that a prolonged election dispute could erupt into a wider political conflict leading to war and, in turn, disrupting their economic interests in the Congo.

For both Washington and Europe, the stakes in the outcome of the election are the Congo's estimated \$24 trillion in untapped raw resources in the form of rare earth minerals, many of which are used in the manufacture of batteries that power smartphones, laptop computers and electric vehicles.

A geopolitical component also figures prominently in the minds of Western imperial strategists, with China perceived by Washington as representing the most significant threat to American dominance in the central African region. China has exercised enormous economic influence with governments across the African continent over the last decade, an arrangement that Washington views as intolerable.

In recent years, the Kabila government has experienced a falling out with Washington over Kinshasa's cozying relationship with Beijing, with Kabila cementing several economic agreements with Chinese companies, in particular projects in the valuable Congolese mining sector.

The author recommends:

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