

**HUMANITARIAN
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Popular Uprisings & Political Stability in the Democratic Republic of the Congo:

Scenarios to 2018

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HUMANITARIAN FORESIGHT THINK TANK

This report explores the dynamics of popular mobilizations and political stability in the DRC in the context of approaching electoral deadlines, with an outlook to 2018. At the time of writing, the situation in DRC is extremely volatile. With each day that passes, events take place that could potentially trigger new uncertainties or shift the focus on a new or different aspect of the crisis. The topicality of the subject, the haphazard collection of data and the short temporality of the actors' behaviours make it difficult to draw conclusions on foresight. This analytical piece presents major uncertainties surrounding the issue, identifies significant drivers at the national level and suggests possible scenarios for the development of the situation over the next two years.

INTRODUCTION

The region is currently experiencing multiple elections, destabilizing debates on constitutional issues leading to varying electoral processes, and leaders using both power and violence to stay in power, and massive popular uprisings which have forced leaders to relinquish power. Where does the DRC sit within this landscape?

The evolution of the pre-electoral crisis in this key country is of primary concern. A destabilization of DRC has the potential to challenge regional stability and could have a catastrophic impact on a population which is already fragile.

In early August 2016 at a speech given in Uganda president Kabila broke his silence to announce what observers of the country had been fearing: the delaying of general elections. This is despite the occurrence of increased demonstrations calling for respect of democracy and the upholding of general elections since January 2015. These rallies have merged with other protests which either support other candidates, call for respect for civil liberties and human rights, or demand peace in the East of the country. Though the messages and demands vary, protesters are united in their shared feelings of anger.

The possibility of a popular uprising, its determinants and triggers and the forms they may take, and their weight in the national future, are at the heart of these questions. In this volatile environment, anything could provoke an uprising, which could quickly spread within cities. Concerns are heightening as the pre-electoral crisis progresses and the election deadline approaches. These concerns are founded on the degree of violence and destruction that could accompany a mass uprising, the uncertainty about what the triggers for such an uprising would be, and finally, the inability to imagine what the consequences of a destabilisation of the DRC (a key player in Central Africa) would be. Due to the diversity of situations, the variability of factors, which influence these, and the way they interact, predictions about the Congolese masses are hard to make. The reaction of the population is indeed affected by the behaviour of certain actors. However, the scale and type of reaction, and the hopes and fears that they conjure in the population, directly and in turn, influence the behaviour of key actors. This is where difficulties arise for observers trying to predict when and what driver could trigger a mass uprising. Will the popular mobilizations, many of which have

marred the recent history of country, significantly undermine the country and counter the centralization of power in the long-term? The components needed to provoke an uprising are present at the national level – now more than ever, but does this mean it will necessarily take place? This is an uncertainty in a country that has such inertia due to its size, its lack of infrastructure leading to low interconnectivity, its diverse population, and the degree of influence other countries maintain as part of regional power projection.

It will depend on how several factors evolve and converge in the upcoming key period: economic situation and purchasing power of the Congolese population, positioning and behaviours of political actors towards national stakes, influence of traditional actors and of the new generation, degree of use of violence and crushing.

DETERMINING KEY DRIVERS AND TRIGGERS

The fertile soil of poverty and insecurity: between rebellion and resignation?

Levels of development in the DRC have seen recent progress, as shown by its jump of 11 rankings in the Human Development Index – in 2014 it was 176th out of 188 countries. Despite the drastic fall in commodity prices, macroeconomic stability was maintained throughout 2015 and projections are favourable for the next 2 years, assuming a recovery of the mining price from 2017 onwards. Inflation, which was at a worrying rate of 53% in 2009, fell to 3% in 2012, and stayed stable at 1% from 2013 to 2015 because of conservative fiscal and monetary policies.

Despite the DRC's impressive economic growth and general stability during this period (2013-2015), poverty rates have remained very high. In 2012, 63% of the population was classified as poor¹, representing just over 44 million people. The distribution of wealth particularly that garnered from natural resource exploitation is non-existent. The level of GDP per capita (in PPP) of the DRC was halved between 1980 and 2012 from \$798 to \$304 in 2012. Purchasing power and generalized low standard of living is a risky weakness for the country, having fuelled frustrations for generations of Congolese.

In a situation of economic weariness, which has been at breaking point for years, rising price of basic commodities could be the trigger to a mass reaction, especially if it occurs at a time of acute frustration and anger, fuelled by a violent repression or by, more delays in democratic processes.

That said, the vulnerability of the majority of the Congolese population could in fact have the opposite effect, whereby fatalism and resignation, decelerate popular mobilization efforts. There is no significant middle class in this country, which could afford to support mass mobilisation over time. The majority of the population devotes their time and energy to meet their immediate needs and those of their families. In this

¹ Source: World Bank

configuration, how could a sufficient portion of the population afford the luxury of participating in a lasting uprising, which demands more democracy or better living conditions? It seems unlikely considering that a lesson from the 1990s resonates during which soldier-led riots detrimentally affected small business owners and the lambda Congolese without achieving significant political impact.

Does a political opposition exist, capable of mobilizing the masses?

The degree to which the political opposition is able to make the population take to the streets is a key element in the evolution of the current political crisis. Indeed, the two main devices at the disposal of the opposition are the positioning of the international community and popular mobilization. With the international community seemingly unwilling or unable to take a united and firm position, the opposition is left with popular mobilization as the only tool to engage the regime. This could in turn incite a reaction from the major actors of the international community present in the DRC.

The Congolese political landscape is complex and reflects the inexperience of democracy in the DRC².

The opposition, which looked to be united at the convention of the 'Rassemblement' organized in June 2016³, comprises a plurality of factions, parties and interests. Other groups that can be added to the opposition movement have refused to be a part of the Rassemblement for example, Vital Kamerhe's UNC party. The uncertainties surrounding the sustainability of the alliance of the opposition are significant. How long will this alliance be able to hold? How long before dissensions appear in the face of dead-end political dialogue and Kabila's strategy of attrition? It seems very likely that as the constitutional deadlines loom ever closer and the steps of the national dialogue are taken by the government, the regime will try to convince opposition parties and leaders to join the dialogue the regime proposes.

In an increasingly blocked situation, disputes could appear within the opposition (led by Tshisekedi) about the degree of flexibility on the preconditions of the dialogue⁴. The changes in positioning over time or between parties could cause a partial isolation of the 'Rassemblement', which could be stigmatized as a hardliner movement, unable to challenge or adapt to the context.

² In 2015, 477 political parties were officially registered in DRC, even if these are still far from covering the entire Congolese territory, or representing the entire population.

³ Convention of the opposition leaders held on June 10 2016 in Brussels, which resulted in the signing of the "act of engagement of political and social forces acquired to change." Main announcements of the opposition were: a common position on national dialogue and the creation of a joint body, called the "Rassemblement" (gathering).

⁴ The dismissal of Tshisekedi right-hand man on August 12 for having shown himself inclined to dialogue with the MP, and the media's rejection of Tshisekedi leadership by some UDPS members few days after, show what internal issues can be within UDPS and the opposition movement.

Some wonder, not just in the Kabila clan, if the opposition really wants participate in elections. Beyond the unifying goal of the opposition to oust Kabila from power, it is possible that they are not ready to go to elections as a unified entity. However, having waited since the 1980s it is difficult to imagine the UDPS renouncing the opportunity to put forward a candidate, even if it lacks the financial resources to win the campaign alone. Would current allies be patient and accept being in second place? The issues of succession and monopolization of power within the opposition parties are ultimately not so different from those that allow the presidential majority to maintain its privileges and retain power for the Kabila clan. A scenario such as that of Burkina Faso, where the masses pushed out the head of state, leaving space for a transition, would probably satisfy some or all of the opposition leaders, who would then have time to prepare for elections.

If such issues are set-aside publicly in the pre-election period, it still does not solve the problem of divisions between and within parties of the opposition. A fragmented political opposition could perhaps succeed in mobilizing the population around common slogans, but could equally dilute political messages and further alienate the part of the population disengaged from politics.

Following a charismatic leader?

In the DRC, political commitment is almost exclusively tied to a political figure — a personality who rallies people to a cause due to charisma, geographical origin, and common interests — much more than around a political party, program or vision. At the present time, the two personalities, who are able to challenge Kabila on the political stage are Etienne Tshisekedi – a long-standing rival - and Moise Katumbi, the former governor of Katanga.

Katumbi has the advantage of his fortune, his origins and his Katangan support base, as well as his positive reputation in the Western community. This political novice has been in forced exile ever since the current government strategically allowed him to leave the country for medical treatment abroad. Though he may react to events through the press and representation through international community, Katumbi will find it hard to mobilise the masses or strike up strategic alliances from afar. As for the regime in the DRC, officials are happier with Katumbi in exile, than in prison at home. The government is likely to arrest him as soon as he lands on Congolese territory, which raises doubts about the sustainability of his desire to return home. In any case, his arrest would undoubtedly provoke popular demonstrations – probably spontaneously in his stronghold of Lubumbashi and organized by its allies in other cities. In the long term however, it is unlikely that these protests would sustain themselves. Despite his financial might and his popularity in certain circles, few Congolese would be ready to die for Katumbi.

As for Tshisekedi, all eyes are on his return to the country and the stance he will take towards the current regime.⁵ He has proven his capacity to mobilise the population since his arrival to the capital, which is even more significant given his embodiment of opposition unity in Katumbi's absence. Despite these signs of popular enthusiasm, uncertainties surround the motivations behind the mobilisation – was this simply a social mobilization celebrating the leader's popularity and return? – and how likely it is to maintain momentum. The old opponent enjoys undeniable popularity in Kinshasa, which Kabila does not. Tshisekedi's age and the tenacity with which he has opposed the regime for so many years has undoubtedly earned him some consideration in the rest of the country as well. However, this aging character can offer little to no perspective of continuity for the Congolese people. Tshisekedi is currently the only unifying force in his party, which increasingly resembles an empty shell shaken by unfruitful succession wars.⁶

The opposition leaders thus seem unlikely to inspire a major mobilization beyond their supporter base.

A stark divide between people and politics

The political opposition tends to consider mass mobilizations as a sure win for their cause. However, a large portion of the Congolese population rejects politics as whole. The significance of this is underestimated by the main political parties, who consider themselves representatives of the country even if the population suffers from a lack of confidence in the political system. President Kabila even went so far as to announce the "revival of the Congolese political class" during one of his speeches in the summer of 2016 as a rebuff to the opposition.

The way the pre-electoral crisis will play out and the behaviour of political leaders, including those in the opposition, in the face of the current deadlock is double-edged. It may well entrench the rejection of politics entirely (which will be bound to endlessly reproduce the same dynamics) or the rejection of democracy itself (which will be blamed for this situation), or otherwise initiate a renewed interest in an endangered democratic system. In any case, the Congolese could continue turning to other citizen engagement channels such as the Lucha or Filimbi movements.

Should repression continue to increase, how long before militants and anti-government sympathizers rise up? And to what degree would mobilization occur? This brings us to another key uncertainty: if the opposition forces are sure to have the people with them, will they be ready to incite a popular uprising and bear the consequences of an insurrection? The political game in the DRC is characterised by the self-interest of an elitist political class and the generalised, common fear of total political collapse and

⁵ Tshisekedi's position on the National Dialogue has not always been constant. He has taken a firm position since his return to the DRC, but was reportedly in discussion with the presidential clan on the contours of the Dialogue a few months ago.

⁶ It is highly likely that the end of Tshisekedi would lead to an implosion of his party.

widespread popular upheaval. Hence, the opposition will likely use the power of popular frustrations to serve its cause and the personal ambitions of its leaders. But they may well backpedal and accept a compromise or even an agreement, rather than risk a collapse of the system.

Popular mobilization will be difficult to channel, even if the opposition had the means to do so, and it is uncertain whether the opposition dares to use this tool at all.

Will the Catholic Church be a decisive actor in the Congolese crisis?

Despite losing ground in the community of believers, the Catholic Church continues to exert significant moral influence on the Congolese population. The religious institution is incomparable to any other in the country, in its network, influence and coverage of the entire territory.

Because of this influence, the ability of the Catholic Church to mobilize should not be underestimated. However, the Church in the DRC is currently facing several dilemmas: firstly, what position must religious authorities take with regard to the political realm? Is it legitimate for the Church to speak out on political issues or processes? After much internal debate, the Congolese religious authorities decided to speak out on the political stalemate.⁷ The Church's stance towards politics could change in the future.

Since the beginning of the pre-election crisis, the Catholic Church has taken on an ambiguous stance suffered from displays of backtracking. Its hesitation to organise a Christian march for democracy and constitutional respect on February 28th, 2016 is a case in point. At the beginning of the crisis, the Church showed commitment to defending the constitution but has since softened its position, mostly out of fear of uncontrolled violence in the event of suppressed protests or uprisings. Because of this the Congolese Catholic Church retreated into silence for a period before in the summer of 2016, returning to the political stage as a political facilitator of the dialogue between the regime and the opposition.

Some observers suggest that the Congolese Church, like any other institution, would also have interests to preserve and that the regime may have found a sympathetic ear within the clergy's membership. Be that as it may, Catholic bishops called on the opposition to initiate dialogue, all the while pressing the government to accede to requests by the opposition to release political prisoners and prisoners of conscience.

The involvement of religious authorities in political dialogue is too new to judge how consistent long-term this positioning may be. This new role is likely to continue evolving, as the function and behaviour of different political actors changes, particularly if the situation was to worsen. Will the church continue to call for dialogue if political positions remain intransigent and follow a dangerous logic for the greater

⁷ A narrow majority of 55% were for, and 45 % against, taking a stance on politics

good? Is the Church at risk of losing credibility and influence? Will the Church's positioning change if violence and repression towards civilians increased?

Can the younger generation make a difference?

Historically the youth of the DRC have been at the heart of anti-government mobilizations. Students in particular have always been one of the most organized and mobilized segments of Congolese civil society, whose actions have often been violently suppressed by the authorities. The last round of elections in 2011 were no exception to the rule: the mobilization of young people on the issue of transparency of the electoral process and for better governance in the state apparatus was quelled by violent repression, particularly in Kinshasa, Mbuji Mayi, and Lubumbashi.⁸ Today universities remain the most likely location for the start of an uprising, acting as a space for heated debate amongst a politicised urban youth (which it must be remembered, is a minority group). The reactions of students are to be carefully observed, as they could be a driving force for a broader protest movement.

The current pre-electoral crisis and the situation of insecurity in the East of the country have given rise to other forms of mobilization, which are either very recent or which haven't been reported before. 'New' citizens' movements, Lucha and Filimbi, have used the model of West African youth movements that rely on social networks to build their mobilization. However even if the media coverage of these were stronger, these movements only represent a small portion of the Congolese youth and the local roots of these movements is limited. Although their mobilization capacity remains difficult to quantify, it is too early to say whether these groups and their tactics could have a national impact. Unlike in West Africa, in the DRC these movements are considered "illegal organizations" and their access to the public space is being heavily restricted. Moreover, the digital divide in the DRC is more important than elsewhere – the majority of the population is rural, infrastructure is highly inadequate, and only 3% of the population has access to the internet (2014)⁹. The 2015 riots clearly showed the limits of communications methods used, when the government shut down all communications platforms. In addition the highly variable connectivity across the nation remains indicative of the isolation of a majority of the population who have little or no access to information or citizen debates, and are therefore less likely to mobilize.

Furthermore, the Congolese civil society suffers from a negative image linked to the politicization of its members. Like other Congolese organizations, differences and divergences exist among the new citizens movement. Faced with a regime that alternates between repressive tactics and calls for dialogue, what roadmap will these organisations have? Issues of trust within these predominantly virtual movements may arise. This 'new' civil society is probably too young to have in itself a decisive impact in the current crisis. Nonetheless, the manner in which this group experience, react to and

⁸ An inquiry by MONUSCO and the OHCHR (2012) declare 33 casualties and 83 injured (most of which were shot) in Kinshasa. This excludes the number of disappeared persons and arbitrary arrests.

⁹ Source: [World Bank](#)

learn from this democratic crisis will determine their role in the democratic future of the country. Their structure, messaging and degree of independence from the government in 2018 will be indicative of the maturity of DRC's civil society.

Aside from those politicised via the citizens' movements or student organizations, could the *rest* of the urban youth sustainably mobilize to stand up for their rights? In a country where over 65% of the population is under 25 years old, and where 15-24 year-olds account for nearly 20% of the population¹⁰, a generational protest could provoke a mass uprising. Could youth protest engender a broader mobilization (including fringe populations which have been hitherto discreet and uninvolved) on the issue of basic needs and subsistence?

The urban youth faces huge barriers to employment and resources, are excluded from the political system, and have unsatisfactory long-term prospects in the DRC. If a situation or declaration were to provoke a youth already frustrated by security incidents and political tensions, they would be likely to take to the streets.

Kabila: the key piece of the chessboard

The fate of President Kabila from December onwards will be a decisive turning point for the DRC, for a minimum of 5 years to come. It is likely that the veteran has for a long time prepared the scenes unfolding today. The presidential majority has made sure to give Kabila's rule a semblance of legality with a judgement from the Constitutional court due to be announced on December 19, 2016. The political dialogue called for by Kabila is starting to appear as the only solution to the pre-electoral crisis, giving the regime an image of credibility. The regime presents itself as the legitimate authority in search of a political consensus for elections that have been delayed by material constraints. The Head of State remains discreet and handpicks his public addresses, forming a political strategy which has undoubtedly been in the making years. He hardens his political language when speaking of insecurity in the East to firstly, pose as a convenor but also secondly, to remind the opposition that they could not retain power in the event of a civil war in the East or an uncontrolled popular insurrection.

Kabila and his clan currently hold the advantage in the political arena. He controls the security forces and the judiciary and it is clear that it is his political strategy that has delayed the electoral process. There is now no reason for Kabila to cede his leadership position as head of state. The most significant concession he is likely to make is by leading an inclusive transition government. Whatever happens, a situation in which Kabila would agree to leave power in the next two years seems too unrealistic to be considered. Although no overt political statements have been made over last few months about Kabila staying in power, all the actions of the presidential majority (such as attempts to amend the constitutional law in early 2015, or the arrest of opponents, etc.) make his plan to retain power explicit. It is clear that Kabila does not want to

¹⁰ ILO March 2012

relinquish power, and the observers' consensus is that apart the force of arms, there are few things that could convince the veteran to relinquish power.

Anticipating the possibility of a revolt or being overthrown by violence, Kabila has carried out alterations within the leadership of the Congolese armed forces. He has also ensured that his personal protection lies in the hands of foreign (especially Zimbabwean) security personnel rather than in the hands of his own countrymen. Unlike the 1990s, in the coming period national law enforcement agencies seem unwilling or unable to initiate anything against Kabila. Moreover, no military or armed group would dare execute an attack on Kabila without being sponsored by an outside power, not for as long as it would seem so suicidal and futile.

Western partners of the DRC have not been very vocal on the political and human rights situation, no doubt aware of their impotence and worried that the struggle for democracy could tip the country into chaos. The impact of Western and European powers on the DRC have declined gradually as the continental dynamics have taken on increased importance. For the influential powers in the region (South Africa and Angola) Kabila remains their best bet in the absence of an alternative, sustainable solution, and ensures stability for the DRC. Rwanda and Uganda concentrate on the other states of East and Southern Africa and are highly unlikely to intervene to remove Kabila from power. Other neighbours of the DRC have neither the means nor the will to intervene. No seizure of power can take place without external support given the immensity and the lack interconnectivity in the DRC's territory.

Since Kabila took office fifteen years ago, civil society has been heavily controlled and protests against his power have been systematically repressed. The regime has learned from the riots in January 2015— equipping forces with less lethal riot gear and learning to manage crowds better, performing risk analyses and resorting to violent less quickly. Kabila is undoubtedly aware of the double-edged sword that the repression represents: though it has the potential to exhaust protesters, gradually choking a rebellion one death too many could just as easily tip the scales and cause an uprising. Since the start of the National Dialogue, Kabila has also increased symbolic signs of policy easing, releasing some political prisoners and meeting some demands made by citizen's movements. Nonetheless if Kabila felt that he was losing control of the popular movements, he could sacrifice his people unscrupulously to stay in power. A 'Mugabe-esque' scenario becomes a possibility, in which the leader would let the country crumble at the expense of economic and social progress.

As elections approach, demonstrations will certainly take place. Protests or strikes organised by political or civic organisations will take place depending on the security environment and the level of civic and economic liberty in the country. In the same vein, a sudden inflation, or the perception of a sudden increase in the price of commodities may also cause spontaneous or organised popular uprising.

A combination of these elements could even push a protest to challenge the governing power and institutions. It is highly uncertain to what degree this type of protest might

take place and what could take them from being specific demonstrations to massive, uncontrollable popular uprisings. In any case it seems very likely that the regime would use force to any or all of these events, to test the commitment and strength of the movement before letting it destabilize. How long would it take protesters to hold out against violence, repression, and the slowing of economic life? How would the opposition, civil society, and religious communities adapt their positioning in the face of changes in the political, security, and economic situations and as symbolic deadline of election day approaches?

SCENARIOS

Each of the following scenarios proposes avenues for the evolution of stability in the DRC with an outlook to 2018. The scenarios combine hypotheses based on key variables and a selection of assumptions. These scenarios do not aspire to account for all iterations of the possible futures, but rather to present a framework for analysis of the system's dynamics.

Assumptions:

- Tshisekedi remains alive during the period, as do other political figures such as Kabila and Katumbi.
- There are no terrorist attacks claimed by the Islamic State or Al Qaeda in the DRC over the next two year period.
- Ethnic divisions are not used as a tool in the political crisis.
- No major changes in leadership occur in the DRC's neighbouring states.

Scenario I: Attrition & Stalemate

In the face of continued political stalemate and fearing a fast-spreading uncontrollable insurgency, religious authorities stand in as mediators of the crisis and increase efforts to encourage dialogue and call on all parties to act responsibly to avoid chaos. They find that political leaders will stop at nothing to acquire power – even if this means sacrificing their countrymen. By publicly calling for calm and dialogue, the Church adopts a more discreet position on democratic issues and the use of violence by the state. A section of the population, particularly the youth, accuses the Church of collusion, and lapse permanently. Demonstrators in Kinshasa start protesting against all institutions (both political and religious) and uncontrollable uprisings (which could in turn target the Church) become more likely. Divisions within the Church become increasingly evident. On the frontline, some priests deviate from the official position of the institution and call for protests against on-going human rights abuses and the interminable rule of Kabila. By 2018, the Church emerges from its political involvement in the crisis weakened by new internal divides on the issue of political neutrality and a crisis of confidence in the youth.

As the mediation process progresses and the election dates approach, the regime continues to call for dialogue and shows signs of concession towards the opposition. Kabila and his clan maintain an image of serenity and legality, highlighting the realities of the electoral process and the legality of him staying in power until elections. Meticulously measured signs of flexibility and calm, which increase in relation to the opposition and civil society, are interspersed with underhanded tactics of destabilisation and repression. This strategy is complemented by attempts to form alliances with members of the opposition, in the hope of weakening their

collective unity. The presidential majority accepts the concept of a transition, seeing it as a means to reshuffle the cabinet without ever really envisaging the departure of Kabila.

Meanwhile, the continued insecurity in the East and speeches made by the presidential majority citing a 'foreign threat'¹¹, heighten chances of deterioration in the country. Kabila stirs up the situation in the East to distract and weaken political and civil opposition. The spectre of international terrorism is floated and dispersed by the media (managed by the presidential clan), and becomes the focus of political debates. Gradually the discourse of the presidential majority changes — urging the opposition to stay calm in the name of patriotic unity. In an attempt to deter political mobilizations and terrorist attacks, the government bans demonstrations.

It proves insufficient for the opposition to solely be united around the single goal of Kabila's departure. It is unable to withstand the enduring war and Kabila's divide and rule tactics. Although party gatherings are permitted and take place at symbolic dates, they are heavily supervised and regulated by the regime. With the passing of key electoral deadlines, the popular movements called by the opposition lose steam, momentum dissipates, and financial and leadership challenges arise. His distance from the territory and his inability to return to it, permanently eliminate Katumbi as a contender, despite various attempts to stay on the political stage via the media and by financially supporting the opposition. In the face of a stalemate and the extension of his forced exile, Katumbi steps back from the Congolese political stage in order to prepare for future elections, cognisant of the fact that nothing will happen in the coming 2-3 year period. The opposition presents a unified front, without having any real anchor; dissensions multiply and there is no more hope for unity or of winning in a battle with the government. By 2018 the opposition can no longer gather support from outside its traditional supporter base. It is no longer considered a force for change.

Demonstrations are held despite prohibitions made by the regime, particularly throughout the symbolic period preceding electoral deadlines -- November and December 2016. Protests are repressed with a carefully calibrated dose of violence – outbursts of public anger are controlled, whilst conveying a clear message to the nation about the risks of contesting power. In the face of the state and a lack of results derived from demonstrations, the populist movement loses steam. At the same time, inflation rises, reducing the population's purchasing power and forcing them to focus on their basic needs, livelihoods and subsistence. Even amongst youth movements, not enough is done to maintain a sufficient presence in the streets to worry the regime or rally wider segments of the population to their cause. Momentum is tapered by the fear that the situation is worsening day by day, that an uprising could paralyse the cities, and that the existing student and citizen movements would not be able to withstand the crisis. Internal divisions within the student movements prevent the development of a common strategy. The regime uses these antagonisms to its advantage to convert segments of the movement, all the while implementing a policy of repression. The 'new' civil society continues to communicate via social networks, but gradually softens its positioning, eventually losing confidence, gradually dispersing, and losing following once the electoral deadlines pass. Other conventional structures of Congolese civil society continue to be involved in the National Dialogue, but remain stuck in the political games and eventually merge into the political landscape.

¹¹ The insecurity in the East is often attributed to an external threat (e.g.: terrorism) but this has not been corroborated.

Scenario II: The spiral of chaos

The political stalemate endures. The opposition's degree of flexibility fluctuates according to behind-the-scenes negotiations and gestures of goodwill on the part of the regime, make the opposition more flexible. Political parties continue to gauge each other, especially within the opposition movement, and appear to adapt their strategies on a piecemeal manner. Kabila plays the long game, remaining impassive and communicating very little. Meanwhile the insecurity in the East continues, inciting concerns, suspicions and debate. Spontaneous marches or demonstrations occur after each major incident, each only a few hundred-strong and systematically thwarted or suppressed, fuelling feelings of injustice and suspicion. The regime responds with force and brandishes the threat of terrorism to pose as the protector of the nation. A proposal is made to the National Assembly to impose a state of emergency, which would permit the state to use violence against civilians in the name of national stability.

The economic situation becomes increasingly unstable in the run up to the December 2016 election deadline. The government struggles to contain inflation as it had done until now, and its members are increasingly dispersed, entangled in the anxiety of a late reign and remain fully mobilized to maintain their ruling clan. The price of basic commodities such as fuel and bread rise rapidly. With the looming deadline, protests increase. The student youth mobilises around issues of standard of living and democracy, marking a sharp break with the political class and the traditional civil society. An increasing number of rallies taking place in cities deteriorate into violent clashes between students and security forces. Despite this, student movements sustain their momentum over a period and grow their presence on social networks, surpassing the influence of movements such as the Lucha or Filimbi. Spontaneous calls for major change and demonstrations increase, with each repression and arrest, spreading anger, and adding momentum to the movement. Tensions rise rapidly in several cities including Kinshasa, and calls are made to mobilize in an increasingly insurrectional manner – utilising non-traditional channels (party politics and mobilization). This time, the youth seem to have nothing more to lose.

Faced with rising tensions, the opposition fears a mobilization that could transcend it, whose slogans target all elites, and who could engender a complete overhaul of the political system. The opposition calls for all parties to stay calm and falls into silence, its members gradually accepting through covert agreements to negotiate a transition led by Kabila. The Catholic Church seeing the magnitude of the crisis and its extension beyond the realm of political negotiation takes refuge in silence – both in order to quell internal disagreements, and in fear of losing all perceived neutrality and thus becoming a target of popular anger. In the absence of democratic and credible alternatives, the Church eventually chooses to remain silent, dictated by the logic of survival and by the realization that the only alternative to Kabila being in charge, would necessarily be very violent and a durable source of instability.

One more massacre in the East combined with a nominal rise in prices, a repressive action or the introduction of a state of emergency occur could all be triggers for a mass uprising. A frustrated population takes to the streets. Youth from across backgrounds become uncontrollably violent, unable to channel their anger, and unable to know how far they will go with it.

Kabila feels that he is losing the support of his population. Feeling a fear of isolation and losing confidence in his army and his clan, Kabila covertly grants his soldiers autonomy and lets them

loose on the civilian population, much as Mobutu had done in the 1990s. Violence and lootings increase in Kinshasa and other cities of the country. Members of the international community are particularly and violently targeted, accused of having held up the democratic process for decades and plundered the country's resources. The increased settling of scores and a situation of chaos destabilizes several cities. Police forces and local authorities abandon their posts and flee. The regime leaves the streets to burn, and stands as the only solid alliance able to put out the fire, maintain national unity, and prevent a power vacuum whereby multiple groups vie for power and take advantage of the chaos to trigger further armed conflict in the East. Kabila is able to stay in power. International institutions suspend financial support to the DRC until the end of the period (2018) pending guarantees of stability. Kinshasa markets and secondary cities are cut off and the economy slows. The violence and looting causes displacement and leaving behind a bereaved, slightly more impoverished urban population. The infrastructure is completely ransacked. Public and private services are incapable of resuming operations for a period of several months.

CONCLUSION

The occurrence and strength of popular uprisings in the DRC and the impact of these on political stability in the coming 24 months will be determined primarily by the behaviour of key actors and the simultaneity of key trigger events. Given the obstinacy of the regime, the dysfunction of the political system, the economic difficulties for the population and the security issues in the East of the country, it seems that it will take a mix of political, social and economic variables to push collective anger to the extreme.

In the end the only way that popular mobilizations will be able to destabilize the regime, would be if these were massive in size and directly affected Kinshasa. If this were to happen, it is clear that no single actor could channel the crowds looking to release feelings of pent up anger and frustration. The only way systemic change will occur in the DRC will be through the mobilization of population with nothing to lose. This will also pose the biggest risk for a descent into chaos. ■

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INSTITUT DE RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES ET STRATÉGIQUES

2 bis rue Mercoeur

75011 PARIS / France

T. + 33 (0) 1 53 27 60 60

contact@iris-france.org

@InstitutIRIS

www.iris-france.org