



PERSPECTIVES

Elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Our perspectives feature the viewpoints of our subject matter experts on current topics and emerging trends.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we examine in depth the 20 December elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The presidential, legislative, and local elections will take the most populous Francophone country globally to the polls. Campaigning has been underway since late November, and is characterised by a strong incumbent, a divided opposition, and seemingly existential insecurity in the eastern provinces. An official result should be declared on 10 January 2024, and as is becoming the custom, will be unsuccessfully challenged in the constitutional court. However, in our base case, not much will change for the business community.

This article considers the most likely outcome from December's presidential poll, which is expected to be a contested win for the incumbent, President Félix-Antoine Tshisekedi and his Union Sacrée political grouping. Aside from the known upper hand that incumbency gives, President Tshisekedi benefits from four main advantages in this month's race. First, a disjointed opposition, unable to unify around a common candidate. Second, while in office, Tshisekedi has successfully cultivated his image as a political strongman and overcome his image as an unofficial victor of the 2018 poll. Third, elections in the DRC are often run on identity-based issues, and fourth, two elements of that, nativism, and local-based alliances, currently play in Tshisekedi's favour.

However, there are two potential scenarios that would alter our base case. One, if a resurgent opposition appoints a unity candidate, and two, if the ongoing insurgency in the east against the rebel group M23, worsens significantly, despite the two-week ceasefire announced on 14 December. But the time for either of these to significantly alter the status quo is running out.

This article unpacks the key issues surrounding the race and their implications for the broader business environment.

A DIVIDED OPPOSITION

Twenty-four presidential candidates have been validated by the electoral commission, with the incumbent president Félix Tshisekedi among them. Few have a chance of winning. Some have thrown their hat in the ring in the hope of negotiating a post in a future government. Others hope to use the election as a platform for a later bid.

Among the opposition candidates is Moïse Katumbi, the former governor of mining-rich Katanga province. An experienced businessman, he has had several runs at the presidency. He is currently attracting the most attention and appears to have the best chance among the opposition.

Another key figure is Martin Fayulu, who claims – with support from Catholic Church exit polls and leaked electoral commission documents – to have won the most votes in the last election in 2018. Also important is Denis Mukwege, a Nobel Peace Prize winning gynaecologist with a strong international standing, and a reputation for moral clarity.

Of the rest, four have recently put their support behind a Katumbi presidency. One, Augustin Matata Ponyo, was formerly the Prime Minister of the DRC, under former president Joseph Kabila. Another, Delly Sesanga, was previously a supporter of President Tshisekedi's father and is from the same province. The others – Seth Kikuni and Franck Diongo – are experienced politicians but have limited clout. This has given Katumbi some additional momentum, though it does not yet give him the edge over the incumbent.

Despite common expectation, former President Joseph Kabila has not put his weight behind a candidate – at least not openly. Instead, he has cultivated an image as a harmless – and even frumpy – gentleman farmer. Time will tell whether he will make his influence felt once more.

STRONGMAN IMAGE: A ‘MAN OF CONCRETE’

President Tshisekedi came to power in January 2019 as the result of a shaky political coalition built with the former President Kabila. Since the first few months of his presidency, Tshisekedi has successfully shed the Kabila yoke, created a new political union, and established himself as a political strongman. Moreover, he regularly brandishes his status as the first president to stand up to DRC’s regional neighbours, especially Rwanda.

This has led Tshisekedi to double down on his nickname: *Fatshi Beton*. This is a truncation of President Tshisekedi’s name, followed by the French word for concrete. This is a useful double entendre. It implies a man of strength, but also refers to a president who builds much-needed infrastructure.

Playing on the latter idea, the president’s campaign has put major emphasis on its moderate but tangible record. Construction projects across the country are splashed on social media and national television, explicitly crediting Tshisekedi with their rollout. These include an international airport, a new highway gyratory, and new government buildings in the mining town of Kolwezi. Airports have also been built in the cities of Kisangani and Boende, both deep in the central forest of the country. In Kinshasa, a new ‘financial centre’ for government offices, as well as new university buildings, are being flaunted. Smaller projects such as roads, schools, medical centres, and bridges are also regular opportunities to brag.

Not all the wins are clear, nor is the message entirely triumphant. The ‘sauts-de-mouton’ of Kinshasa – an early set of road flyovers that have not had the promised effect of reducing traffic – are notably absent. Discussions of the country’s enduring poverty, a refugee crisis in the eastern provinces, and continuing concerns about the shortcomings of state institutions are left for the opposition. Accompanying the president’s campaign images, the slogans often ask citizens whether they want to ‘Start from scratch or consolidate the gains.’ This reads somewhat as an acknowledgement of the – perhaps inevitable – slow pace of change.

NATIVISM IS RESURGENT

Other campaign messages have been less savoury, with nativism also coming to the fore. Efforts to renegotiate mining deals in the country’s favour, push local content in subcontracting, and towards handling security in the east are all put forward as successes in defending the country’s sovereign rights.

But nativism also has another face. A legal attempt to restrict the presidency to citizens whose parents both were born in the country was unsuccessful, but the spirit behind it is ever-present in this campaign. The politician who proposed the idea – Noël Tshiani – is a presidential candidate. Concerns about the influence of neighbouring countries abound – in no small part due to fear of Rwanda’s involvement in the eastern provinces.

Accusations have circulated that Moïse Katumbi is Zambian, based on an apparent image of an old passport. His mixed heritage has repeatedly been cited as an argument against him, ultimately to suggest that he is not Congolese enough to be president. Katumbi’s father was a Sephardic Jew from Rhodes, one of many to flee from fascism to the DRC. As such, he is variously referred to as Greek or Italian (since Rhodes was under Italian occupation when his father left), or indeed as Jewish or Israeli, and therefore not Congolese. President Tshisekedi, as a Kinshasa-born son of a long-standing opposition leader, who spent many years in his father’s province of origin, is spared from these accusations – despite almost as many years spent living abroad.

ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL

Identity-based tensions are also being played out within the country. Some in the provinces of former Katanga have criticised the president speaking very little Swahili, the lingua franca of half the country. The president made a retort to this in Lubumbashi, the capital of Haut-Katanga and the old capital of Katanga. He spoke brazenly in Lingala, the language of Kinshasa and the military, telling the assembled crowd to not listen to those who make speeches in Swahili or refer (in Swahili) to “our Katanga”, since “they built nothing.” But in another speech in Katanga, this time in Swahili, one of the president’s advisors (and a native of Katanga) suggested to a crowd that a key figure of the president’s coalition was not welcome there. The primary

basis? That he was from former Kasai province, and that “the destiny of Katanga will be decided by its own children”.

As these contradictions and differing tactics imply, local dynamics are messy, complex, and overlapping. This is even more so, since each presidential candidate is not the pinnacle of a single neat pyramid of political organisation. Each presidential candidate instead comes with a network of candidates – primarily for the national and provincial legislatures, as well local assemblies – supporting them. These candidates have their own agendas, arguments, and methods. They – and the parties they represent or lead – are often only temporarily loyal to their presidential candidate, in the trust that rallying votes will pay dividends.

Rallying votes can take many forms. Hyperlocal issues, personal or group loyalties, and intercommunity tensions can all be important. Crucially, for most Congolese citizens, Kinshasa – and its issues and political personalities – is a world away. Each local candidate and their relationships will play a critical role in shaping narratives and winning the trust of each voter for the president or his opponents.

For this reason, the accretion of personalities plays a big role in Congolese politics. And, as it stands, the president has the stronger network. At the upper echelons these include his ministers, many provincial governors, and a variety of advisors and parastatal bosses.

Notably, in early 2023, Tshisekedi gathered to his side several political heavyweights with strong followings. Among these, Jean-Pierre Bemba – a former warlord with a firm political base in the north and northeast – and Vital Kamerhe – the president’s former chief of staff, and a rare ally from South Kivu province – both became vice prime ministers. Each sit at the head of their own political party and will occasionally hint at their capacity for independent action. Their somewhat stained records have not counted against them this time around.

Beyond them are many other lesser figures, drawn to the man they think will win – the man of concrete. Each hope to deliver amply for the winner, and to be rewarded with plum posts once a government is formed.

WHAT COULD ALTER THE STATUS QUO?

Overall, Tshisekedi has the advantage. There are two scenarios that could change this picture. Both are relatively unlikely and both are swiftly running out of time to impact the 20 December poll.

The first elephant in the room is whether the opposition can unite. At the time of writing, the opposition has made only lacklustre attempts to select a single unity candidate to challenge Tshisekedi. In particular, both Fayulu and Katumbi appear unwilling to drop out for the other. This failure to horse-trade among themselves has damaged the opposition’s chances.

Another variable is the war raging in the eastern provinces. On 12 December, armed groups downed their weapons for 72 hours to allow for the withdrawal of troops from a nearby town to Goma, Mushaki. The ceasefire was then extended, for two weeks, until 28 December. Despite minor skirmishes, the ceasefire has, at the time of writing, been so far broadly adhered to. It is unclear whether this will hold, however. It is also unlikely that even a largescale attack on the city of Goma by the M23 militia, disenfranchising further communities in North Kivu, and undermining the incumbent’s sovereigntist case for re-election, will either cause a delay to the poll, or significantly impact its outcome. While further disenfranchisement will fuel even more dispute over the presidential result, it is unlikely to even prompt international outrage, given the lack of international observers since the withdrawal of the EU observation mission, and only a weak Southern Africa Development Community observation mission in place.

But time is on Tshisekedi’s side. In the days ahead, and, in future articles, we will begin to consider next steps: how a second term President Tshisekedi constructs his cabinet based on December’s result, and who among his diverse range of allies will be rewarded with the choicest roles.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Patrick Edmond and Indigo Ellis for providing insight and expertise that greatly assisted this research.

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