



## AFRICA POLICY BRIEF

# The Rise of the Street: The Population of Kinshasa as an Unpredictable Actor in the Electoral Process

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The protests that broke in January 2015 in various cities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) over proposed changes to the electoral law demonstrated the important role that disaffected urban populations can come to play in the upcoming elections in the country. Frustrated with precarious socio-economic living conditions and a regime that is increasingly perceived as unrepresentative and unresponsive to the needs and aspirations of the population, there is a real risk of more large-scale violence. While it is impossible to predict if, when and how such violence will erupt, three possible trigger factors are: unmet electoral deadlines, police repression of mass gatherings (to protest, celebrate, mourn, or demonstrate over socio-economic issues...), and the escalation of trivial incidents.

### INTRODUCTION

Since September 2014, President Joseph Kabila's political family has attempted several times to create the conditions to push the reign of Kabila beyond its constitutional limit of 19

December 2016. Aubin Minaku, the Speaker of the National Assembly, attempted to change the constitution in September 2014 but was unable to mobilise the necessary majority.

Then, in January 2015, the government attempted to pass a new electoral law, which included a census that would have delayed elections by several years. Once again, however, this was thwarted — this time not by parliament but by the street. Protests and demonstrations were organised in several cities throughout the country during which, according to Human Rights Watch, 36 people were killed in Kinshasa and four in Goma. The proposed electoral law was removed from the agenda.

Since the riots of January 2015, the urban population in the DRC is considered an independent actor which could have a decisive impact on the electoral process, not only as the electorate but also as a mass of angry people demonstrating against a regime by which it does not feel represented. It is hard to predict if, how and when it will turn to violence and whether the institutional players (majority, opposition, civil society...) understand that they may no longer have the capacity to manage, steer or channel the anger of the population. Nobody had expected the violent reactions to the electoral law in January 2015. Most remarkable

was the fact that demonstrators only partially followed the directives and watchwords of the opposition. The demonstrations taught us that the population is not only allergic to the continuation of the present regime, but that it is disconnected from the entire political caste.

In early 2016, two major events made it clear how emotional people may react, how quickly they can come together in large groups, and how fast such gatherings can take on an explicit anti-Kabila character. The first event was the death of Marie Misamu, the famous singer of Christian music who suddenly died of a heart attack in January 2016, in her early 40s. The news spread rapidly in different areas of Kinshasa and brought thousands of people into the streets. The second event was the outpouring of public joy following a series of football matches leading the DRC towards the finale of the African Championship of Nations (CHAN) in Kigali in early February 2016. After each game, an increasing number of people celebrated the victory in the street. On 7 February, Congo defeated Mali in the final. The victory was celebrated in the streets with a strange cocktail of extreme happiness over the victory and extreme anger, shouting anti-Kabila slogans and chanting Yebela, a song which says: ‘Watch out, everything has a beginning and an end, soon your mandate is over’.

The regime is preparing itself for the possibility of street protests. Surveillance cameras are currently being installed in strategic squares, crossings and streets of the capital. New crowd-and-riot control vehicles and other non-lethal equipment (including tear gas and stun-grenade equipment) have been purchased; security personnel are prepared to increase the regime’s capacity to anticipate an outburst of violence. There are also many indications that the regime recruits and trains young people and organises them into gangs to intimidate opponents of the regime or to infiltrate peaceful gatherings.

So what is the potential for a popular outbreak of protest, given the turbulent election process the DRC is facing? This policy brief explores the nature and scope of these street protests and the factors that may see them escalate into violence. It provides insight into people’s feelings and perceptions about the current political situation.

The analysis presented in this brief is based on the results of preliminary research, undertaken in collaboration with a local research team,<sup>i</sup> into how people at the grassroots level look at the uncertainties of the ongoing electoral process, what their view is on the process and how they see the near future unfolding. Thirty people in key positions in the political landscape were interviewed and 12 focus group discussions were organised. We spoke with organisations of both academic and unschooled youth, martial arts practitioners and other sports clubs, militant priests and Christian activists at the grassroots level, youth groups of political parties, official religious authorities, and official spokespeople for civil society, the ruling PPRD party, opposition parties and Front Citoyen 2016.

### **YEBELA: A GENERALIZED “RAS-LE-BOL” AT THE GRASSROOTS LEVEL**

In all these interviews, it was very evident that the people in the communes and neighbourhoods are frustrated and angry, due to precarious socio-economic living conditions. People face difficulties in feeding themselves and their families and unemployment is widespread, not only for the unskilled labour force but also for young graduates and intellectuals. Decent housing is hard to find and unaffordable. Good health care and education are inaccessible. Failing services of water and electricity provision are additional sources of great frustration.

Nearly all the people interviewed believed the regime bore the main responsibility for their poverty. For them, the achievements of the democratisation process do not exist, and

nothing has fundamentally changed in the way the country has been governed since Mobutu died. Just beneath the surface, the discourse is very violent, with views such as this: ‘We live in conditions that exist nowhere else. The man at the top is responsible. His time is running out. But if he stays one day longer than his mandate, we will chase him and his regime out’. A remarkable majority of the people we spoke with consider violence at this point as an inevitable outcome of the current political crisis.

The frustration and anger of the people at the grassroots level in Kinshasa also focuses on Swahili-speaking citizens in the capital, alleged supporters of the regime, with respondents saying, ‘I am unemployed because I don’t speak Swahili’. The international community is also a target of potential violence, as we had people tell us, ‘We suffer because the international community installed and maintained the present regime against the candidates of our choice’.

### **INSTITUTIONAL PLAYERS HAVE LOST THEIR STREET CREDIBILITY**

The overwhelming rejection of Kabila and his regime does not mean that the Congolese population embraces the opposition. Many people feel entirely disconnected from the political scene. They see the political caste as an elite which uses politics as a way to make a living for themselves and to create opportunities for their family, their clan, their ethnic group, their region. In this, they rarely distinguish between politicians of the majority or the opposition.

The opposition’s present support levels within the capital should not be overestimated. Tshisekedi played his cards very poorly after the last elections by not stepping into the ring as an opposition leader. His party is hopelessly divided and even his most devoted followers have difficulty understanding his point of view on some essential issues. Following his sentencing to 18 years in prison by the International Criminal Court in June 2016,

Bemba will not come back to the political scene any time soon, and his party formally split in 2015. Politicians who left the majority — such as the G7 parties, Moïse Katumbi and, to a lesser extent, Vital Kamerhe — will face difficulties in convincing the population that they represent a genuine alternative to the present regime, given the fact that they formed an essential part of it for a long time.

Moreover, while civil society was a rapidly up-and-coming force in the early 90s, today it has lost its capacity to mobilise and inspire the masses. A key reason for this is that, over time, civil society organisations have become an excellent way to raise funds and serve as a springboard to gain access to political office. This has attracted a new and different kind of leadership, much less activist and allegedly more opportunistic. Its national institutions lack cohesion and legitimacy and the connection with the people at the grassroots level has eroded.

Churches are also perceived quite critically at present. They are important institutions in Congolese society, a source of power and social regulation, and are deeply involved in governance on many levels. But the national leadership of the Protestant and Kimbanguist churches and the Islamic community are perceived as favouring the political status quo. The Catholic Church is different. Many believers think that the church can play a leading role in the electoral process, though recent events revealed that the National Episcopal Conference is strategically divided internally on how to position the church. Still, it is obvious that the church could be a very important voice against the disrespect of the constitution, on the condition it can sort out its current ambiguities.

### **SELF-MOBILISATION AT THE GRASSROOTS LEVEL**

The institutional stakeholders acknowledge that the frustrations felt by a majority of the population create an explosive situation and they

are aware that they possess limited moral authority or capacity to steer any form of uprising. It is important to underline, however, that the fact they are losing their grip on public opinion at the grassroots level does not mean that people are unorganised. In a context where existing institutionalised structures have lost credibility in the eyes of the community, people search for new forms and structures and new types of leadership. The buzzword in the suburbs of Kinshasa is 'auto-prise en charge par la population'. In many corners of daily activity, groups try to organise themselves and be independent from people and institutions outside the team, the group or the neighbourhood. The leadership which will emerge from such dynamics will be local and multipolar.

Many initiatives which are currently emerging are located at the very local level, around parishes, local social work and projects, youth and sport clubs. An interesting case seems to be the football club Renaissance, founded by fans who decided to leave the club of Imana/Daring Club Motema Pembe (DCMP). Its president is Pasteur Mokuna. The unique nature of the club lies in the fact that it receives most of its funding through direct contributions from fans. This is why Renaissance kept recurring in the discussions we had, as people felt 'it is our club because we, all together, put the money on the table to make it happen.'

Another example is La Lucha. The youth movement likes to state: 'We are not an organisation. We don't have the ambition to become one. We are even less an NGO. We don't need statutes or a board of administrators. We won't try to get officially registered. Our actions cost money but we are not looking for donors. We try to mobilise the necessary funds by scraping the last francs from our pockets'. La Lucha places good governance and accountability at the centre of their actions. They encourage citizens to question authorities

in terms of service delivery: Why don't we have water in this town? What happened to the roads you started to construct long ago but never finished? The aim is to raise awareness within the population about the rights and obligations of all parties involved in a functioning democracy.

This cry for change is partially a generational conflict. Young people are very important demographically and fear they may be marginalised in the upcoming elections, particularly if the electoral roll is not updated. Since early 2015, Congolese authorities have feared these new forms of mobilisation as initiated by La Lucha. When La Lucha attempted to set up a national network under the name of Filimbi in March 2015, all participants were arrested. Two of them are still in jail and many activists have been arrested and imprisoned in Goma while protesting against the former's detention in Kinshasa.

At present, there is an intense focus on building networks between formal and informal youth organisations, including the youth leagues of the different political parties.<sup>ii</sup> They all create as many occasions as possible to meet each other. Universities seem to be the ideal place for youth activism, exchange, and joint strategic thinking. It is the natural environment for networking among young intellectuals. Several of the focus groups with unskilled and unschooled youngsters use the universities as a reference point for their own mobilisation. Some of them have a very violent view of the way events will develop, but when we ask: 'When will you launch the actions you planned?' They answer, 'We will observe them [university students]. When they go to the streets, we will follow'.

A key question though is whether the new leadership we are seeing emerge locally will have enough structure and legitimacy to orient, steer or contain protests in case mass violence breaks out. It seems unlikely that such leadership will

have time to grow and consolidate itself before the end of Kabila's current mandate.

### **WHAT COULD TRIGGER VIOLENCE?**

Since the violent demonstrations in January 2015, the Congolese population is aware of its power and of the fact that the Kabila regime knows it will not be able to control the masses. All of the participants met by the research team take the potential for violent outbursts very seriously. Many believe that violence is at this point inevitable, while others believe it can be avoided — or at the very least channeled in a less destructive direction -- through constructive action and responsible leadership.

But at what moments and for what reasons could riots break out and escalate in large-scale violence?

a) The chances for mass demonstrations turning violent are high during events and on deadlines related to the electoral process. As Kabila is the legitimate head of state until 19 December 2016, many people we spoke with see December 19 and 20 as crucial days. If he has not left power by then, the situation on the street could change overnight. The population is very sensitive to any delays. Although it may be technically impossible to organise timely elections, this is entirely the government's fault in the eyes of the public. Other dates are potentially as explosive, for instance November 27 (the day the elections should have been organised) or September 20 (90 days before the end of the mandate) or any declaration by Kabila, the government or the electoral commission (CENI) revealing the president's intention to stay in office. Such events and moments are sensitive for violence and counter-violence, both of which can get out of control.

b) In the meantime, any mass gatherings in one of Congo's major towns which are met with an exaggerated deployment of police and/or army repression could trigger a wave of violence

that spreads rapidly. People come together in the streets to protest, celebrate, mourn, etc. Besides political meetings and demonstrations, such events could be, for example, football matches, the deaths of well-known people, the return of Tshisekedi, etc. Non-political demonstrations, for instance on socio-economic issues, could also cause disproportionate repression and set off broader violence.

c) A trivial incident could be followed by a dramatic act which escalates unexpectedly into something much bigger, as happened in Tunisia, where street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi committed suicide in protest at the confiscation of his wares and the harassment and humiliation inflicted on him by a municipal official. The announcement of his death on 4 January 2011 set in motion protests on social and political issues across the country, which forced President Zine el Abedine Ben Ali to resign after 23 years in power. People in Kinshasa's militant municipalities tell us: 'We live in poor circumstances, submitted to the worst harassments, humiliations and violence from policemen and soldiers. One day, maybe tomorrow, next week or later, a rather trivial incident will take on larger proportions, because one particular incident shocked us. We will mobilise ourselves and very soon contaminate the other parts of town with our protest. We will chase the regime out.'

The DRC is in the midst of an electoral process that does not possess many, if any, democratic qualities. At this point, it seems unlikely that president Kabila will be able to push through a revision of the constitution or impose a transitional government that will eventually create the circumstances for a new mandate. But slippage is now a fact and a present reality, and the Congolese political elite will have to come together and discuss a number of essential issues on how to deal with this.

If the country's political elite manages to come to an agreement and put in place a process that will realistically lead to free and fair elections within a reasonable timeframe, and with the explicit proviso that Kabila will not stand for a third mandate, the slippage will not necessarily lead to violence and chaos. That is, if the political elites manage to convince public opinion of the seriousness of the agreement and process.

If there is no such agreement and Kabila manages to remain in power beyond his mandate, the present crisis will resemble the end of the Mobutu years. The main parallel is the fact that we are in a period where any form of process seems to vanish, is unraveled or evaporates to the point where everyone is unsure of what lies ahead.

At this point, we cannot exclude that large-scale violence will kick off in one of the major cities, leading to a rapid implosion of the state and the crumbling of its institutions. This would create a situation that may be highly unpredictable and

entail a very high cost in human, material and institutional terms.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The research was conducted for DFID DRC's Evidence, Analysis and Coordination Programme (EACP), on behalf of Integrity Research and Consultancy, in March and April 2016. Kris Berwouts was lead researcher. Manya Riche, Soraya Aziz and Gérard Bisambu were co-consultants.

<sup>ii</sup> Several of our interlocutors from political parties' youth leagues told us that, although they are loyal to their party, they consider themselves in the first place as young activists for change. For them, connecting with organisations like La Lucha and Filimbi is a priority.



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