

## Democratic Republic of Congo: A fighting chance to live up to its name

*Some called it a miracle, others credited the heavy presence of UN and international peacekeepers for the relatively smooth elections. After surviving a legal challenge by his main opponent, the president-elect of the Democratic Republic of Congo is free to rule. But in this text book case of the chaos left by a long colonial, and neo-colonial, scramble for Africa, can the son of former dictator chart a truly democratic, peaceful and prosperous future for the country? UNU-MERIT PhD researcher Alexis Habiyaemye draws parallels from the country's troubled past to analyse how the country can finally live up to its name and vast economic potential.*



After the announcement on November 15 that incumbent president Joseph Kabila had won the second round of presidential elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) – and the failed legal challenge by the main opposition rival Jean Pierre Bemba - the democratization process initiated amidst the turmoil of the Congolese war has arrived at a new crossroads. Following the first free elections in 41 years, there is hope for a new era of stability across the entire region. However, the intermittent eruptions of violence during the electoral process, as unpredictable as the Nyiragongo volcano on the northern shores of Lake Kivu, are a stark reminder that democratic process is still extremely fragile.

Any realistic assessment of the country's future must draw lessons from the long and ambushed path that this country has followed in its quest for democracy and national reconstruction. With 57 million inhabitants in an area spanning 2,345,000 square km, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is

comparable to Western Europe in size and has some of the richest reserves of minerals such as cobalt, niobium, diamonds, uranium, copper, nickel, gold and coltan. For this reason the Congo has always been coveted by foreign powers, a trait that has characterized its history throughout the centuries from the first contacts with Portuguese explorers in the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century. Just a few years ago, rebel groups and virtually all of DRC's neighbours were embroiled in a war to control the mining of Congolese coltan, a high-value mineral used in the manufacturing of mobile phones and portable computers. The result of such continuous foreign covetousness and domestic mismanagement has been an impressive contrast between the rich endowments in natural resources and the widespread poverty in that country, a contrast that should be more appropriately called "the Congo pandemic" rather than the "Dutch disease".

Just as the failure of the former dictator Mobutu's Zaire was emblematic of post-colonial Africa's failure to liberate itself economically despite the abundance of natural resources, the success of the Congolese democratic process will herald Africa's definitive emergence from the political systems inherited from the cold war. However, success will require more than just maintaining

the status quo and shielding behind the electoral endorsement of a power that has been inherited from father Kabila against a background of atrocities and a war in which almost 4 million people lost their lives. The population is longing not only for security and stability but above all for a decent life, with access to basic amenities like food, clean water, education and adequate health care.

People want a country with solid institutions that can uphold the fragile democracy and bring it to maturity, a country with efficient physical infrastructure allowing a sustainable economic reconstruction, promise of a prosperous future that has long been denied to them. High on the list of urgent tasks is:

- developing a plan for sharing power with the legitimately elected opposition;
- rebuilding civilian institutions to negotiate a more equitable distribution of wealth across the country's regions;
- Reasserting the country's autonomy within the region and demanding greater accountability by international investors and development organizations.

The overriding lesson from DRC's past is that the country must find the political will to reject external interference and harness the country's vast resources for the benefit of its people. This will require recognizing that the true riches of the country are its people and embarking on a concerted and sustained engagement with all citizens to rebuild the country from the ground up.

In that respect, if the new president fails to deliver on his promises and the legitimate expectations of his people, he will not claim to lack historical cases providing examples to emulate or try to outperform: in 44 BC (710 AUC), a certain C.I.Caes. Octavianus, aged barely 20, also inherited the power after the assassination of his (adoptive) father who had conquered it by toppling another powerful general in a civil war. By his political ingenuity, the young general succeeded (albeit after yet another civil war) in bringing stability to his country, and he is still credited for having led it to its cultural, economic and social golden age (pax augusta). When he died in 14 AD as Augustus, he had built more than 80 thousand km of roads throughout his immense country and had embellished his capital City without putting unnecessary luxury to his own private residence.

### [From Congo to Zaire and Back: A Historical Overview](#)



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