

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): 2017 Outlook



Social unrest marked Congo's 2016 political climate. Such unrest was the result of the failure to organize the presidential election, which was scheduled for November. On the security front, violent fighting between a local militia in the central provinces, as well as a series of massacres in the Beni territory (in the east), were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of civilians, in addition to material damage.

The following document gives a projection of the main issues to watch during the year ahead.

1. The election crisis to dominate the country's political landscape

President Kabila has benefitted from the National Independent Electoral Commission's inability to hold elections last November. Two political dialogues were held between Kabila's ruling coalition (*Majorité Présidentielle*) and the opposition, as an attempt to resolve the resulting electoral crisis. The first, held between Kabila's camp and part of the opposition — under the African Union's mediation — was boycotted by the main opposition (the *Rassemblement*), which eventually did not recognize its resulting agreement¹, citing lack of "inclusivity".

Under the mediation of the Congolese National Episcopal Conference (CENCO), a second dialogue was held — mainly between the ruling coalition and the *Rassemblement* — and produced a new (different) agreement on 31 December, 2016. This latter agreement gave the main opposition (non-signatory to the earlier agreement) the mandate to form a transitional government, with Kabila staying on until the presidential election (presumably in December 2017). Yet, a group of opposition politicians who took part in the earlier dialogue, and who are currently serving in the government it produced, have rejected the 31 December 2016 agreement, judging it not "inclusive".

The ongoing impasse is more likely to delay the implementation of either of the political agreements, and could have a significant bearing on the country's stability.

The previous transitional government (2003-2006) received a positive note for helping end the civil war, and later producing Congo's first-ever democratic elections. Like the previous one, the expected transitional government will have the merit of having averted the chaos which threatened to engulf the nation towards the end of Kabila's last term (19 December, 2016). Yet the litmus test will be the organization of the elections, as far as, unlike during the previous transitional government, Kabila may lack the incentive to organize an election in which he is not allowed to compete.

Potential difficult working conditions between Kabila and his main rivals of the *Rassemblement*, who are expected to lead both the transitional government and the monitoring committee of the political agreement, could thus poison the political landscape, block the organization of the elections, and lead to chaos.

2. Civil unrest more likely to continue despite agreements between the main political actors

The year 2016 was marked by civil unrest, as opposition supporters held protests to demand that President Kabila steps down at the end of his second term. On two occasions — 19-20 September and 19 December — security forces managed to quell popular protests, resulting in several dozens of deaths, and arrests of opposition supporters and figures.

The two afore-mentioned political agreements have tilted the political balance in favour of the 45-year President, by allowing him to stay in power until the election of a new President (either in April 2018 as per the first deal, or

¹ Under this agreement, a transitional government led by an opposition figure (Sammy Badibanga) was formed and sworn-in. It also allowed Kabila to remain in office until elections are organized by April 2018.

December 2017 as per the second). If last year's civil unrest was sparked by the opposition's demand that Kabila steps down, any such unrest this year is instead more likely to result from people's frustrations over the potential failure to implement the second political agreement, which, arguably, has gained widespread support.

3. The security situation in North Kivu, Kasai, Kasai Central and Kasai Oriental provinces

2016 has seen an unending wave of massacres of civilians in villages around Beni territory (eastern Congo), as well as violent fighting between security forces and a local militia in and around Tshimbulu, in the Kasai.

In December 2016 alone, hundreds of civilians lost their lives in a string of massacres near Beni, many of them killed by machetes, knives, hoes and axes, in attacks authorities allege were perpetrated by a Ugandan rebel group, the Alliance of Democratic Forces (ADF).

Adding to the afore-mentioned are concerns about the deteriorating security situation in the provinces of Kasai, Kasai Central and Kasai Oriental, where fighting between militants of a slain local chief, Kumuina Nsapu, and security forces have resulted in over 100 deaths and considerable material damage in the past year.

The afore-mentioned security concerns were overshadowed by the political events in the capital Kinshasa, but that trend is likely to continue (or worsen) in 2017, especially if Kabila and his close allies (especially in the security forces) continue to privilege the regime's survival to the detriment of security.

4. Economic conditions to deteriorate further

There are no signs indicating that the price of extractive commodities, on which Congo's economy overly depends, will improve on the global market in 2017. Having lost up to 20 percent of its value in 2016, in comparison to the USD, the CDF (Congo's currency) will continue to fall this year. As the value of the dollar continues to skyrocket (currently selling for 1,300 CDF compared to 1,100 end of November 2016), the price of imported basic commodities, such as sugar, rice and flour, amongst others, will keep increasing, making day-to-day living unbearable for millions of Congolese.

With a USD 4 bn budget (an approximately 25 percent cut from the previous year), as former Prime Minister Matata Ponyo announced shortly before his resignation, there remains serious doubts regarding the government's ability to finance social programmes as well as the upcoming general elections.

Kinshasa appears to still retain some measure of legitimacy vis-à-vis its major bilateral donors — such as the European Union, Belgium and France — owing, in large part, to the two afore-mentioned political agreements. Yet such donors will continue to closely monitor the situation, and could suspend their aid, should Kabila display bad faith in implementing the political agreements. A situation which would have a significant impact on the country's economy.

Worsening living conditions may influence the course of political events, depending on the political context itself. A proven commitment by the main political actors to organize the presidential election within the timeframe laid out in the political agreements, will likely appease the masses, given the importance attached to the elections.

5. Projection

Issues related to the application of the 31 December, 2016 political agreement will dominate the political arena, at least during the first quarter of 2017. Tough economic conditions are more likely to persist throughout the year, and could have a significant bearing on the political situation.

Potential factors capable of further delaying the elections — and lead to more unrest — include, 1) difficult working relations between Kabila and his main rivals, who will soon form a new government and control the monitoring committee of the political agreement, 2) budgetary constraints, 3) as well as a significant deterioration of the security framework in the central and eastern parts of the country.