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DRC Needs New Post-Election Partnerships

PETER KAGWANJA

Africa's neighbours and outside powers for once backed the delicate transition process and the historic multi-party elections to the hilt, which culminated in the installation, on 6 December 2006, of Joseph Kabila as the Democratic Republic of Congo's first democratically elected leader in over 40 years. The post-election DRC is now sovereign, with a legitimate government in place. However, the Congo's politics are brittle and its 59.3 million people are not yet out of the woods.

Congo risks a relapse into war if its external partners fail to remain engaged with the political process. This is the conclusion of participants to a high-level round-table in Pretoria on 30 January 2007, on "Post-Election Republic of Congo: Towards Partnerships for Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development." The meeting convened by the Pretoria-based think-tank, Human Science Research Council together with South Africa's Department of Foreign Affairs, urged policy pundits to cull lessons from old engagements to forge new post-election partnerships in the DRC.

Partnerships: good, bad and ugly

Paradoxically, the role of outside powers and African states in the DRC, since its independence from Belgium in 1960, has both a silver lining and a sinister ring to it. In his widely read book, *The Murder of Lumumba*, the Belgian historian Ludo de Witte documents the connivance of external powers and segments of the Congolese elite in the cruel assassination of the Congo's first elected Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, in January 1961. Western powers blessed and bankrolled Mobutu Sese Seko's kleptocracy for 32 years. The Congo became a haven of foreign mercenaries and other entrepreneurs of the criminal underworld attracted by its fabulous mineral wealth.

The Congo's African neighbours took the plunge after the West - Belgium, Britain, France and the United States - exited the stage when anti-Mobutu rebels invaded in October 1996. Nigeria's bid to reconcile Mobutu and rebel leader, Laurent Kabila, backfired. Nelson Mandela's mediation on board the battleship, *Outeniqua*, also fell through. Kabila, backed by Rwanda and Uganda, swept to power in Kinshasa in May 1997.

Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe joined the fray in 1998, sending in troops to answer Kabila's cries for help to head off a rebel invasion propped up by his erstwhile allies - Rwanda and Uganda. This triggered what has been dubbed 'Africa's First World War' as part of the Congo's 1998-2003 civil war, which killed nearly 4 million people.

The Global and Inclusive Agreement on Transition in the DRC, hammered out in Pretoria in 2002, paved the way for the withdrawal of foreign troops and the installation of a Unity Government. The transition arrangement was a spectacular balancing of local power relations. President Joseph Kabila agreed to a power sharing deal with four of his nemeses serving as Vice-Presidents.

Support for the transition

After 1999, the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC (MONUC) became the public face of international partnership for the Congo's transition. With 17,500 troops and an annual budget of just over \$1 billion, MONUC is by far the largest UN peacekeeping mission in the world. However, MONUC is a little too small to pacify a country the size of Western Europe - 2344.9 square kilometres.

The Kinshasa-based International Committee for Supporting the Transition (CIAT) was formed as a broad-based coalition of African and external powers that successfully kept the transition on a steady keel. Another backstop for the transition was the European Union. The EU contributed some 33 million euros towards training a 38,000-strong police force in 2005-2006 and also deployed 400-450 soldiers in Kinshasa (with 800-1,000 on standby in nearby Gabon) to secure the elections.

For its part, America's intervention centred on diffusing tensions between Congolese, Burundian Rwandan and Ugandan armies. Its Joint Verification Commission (JVC), created in 2004, worked to enhance their cooperation in intelligence gathering.

On the African front, in addition to its role as mediator, South Africa deployed 1,268 troops to the Congo and signed a Joint Bilateral Commission (JBC) with the DRC in January 2004, worth US\$10 billion. The pact enabled it to train some 300-police officers at a price tag of \$5 million and to train the Third Brigade of the Congolese national army (together with Belgium). However, the sticking point is the potential impact of corporate South Africa on the Congo's reconstruction. Similarly, Angola trained 3,800 police, 80 members of an anti-crime brigade and 40 police trainers. It also trained the Congo's Second Integrated Brigade and a battalion of commando troops at a total cost of \$50 million.

Unfinished Business

Lasting peace and democracy in the DRC remains a work-in-progress. Ironically, while expanding democratic space the electoral process has also opened up new fault-lines of insecurity. The fierce battle for the presidency has polarised politics into pro-Kabila "*Swahiliphone*" and pro-Bemba "*Lingalaphone*" zones. The flare-up of post-election violence has significantly dimmed the post-election air of optimism. Clashes after the gubernatorial elections in January 2007 killed some 77 people in the Bas Congo province. Pockets of fighting linger on in the Eastern regions of Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu.

Largely ill-trained and underpaid troops of the national army (FARDC) remain a serious threat to peace, being accused of plunder, brutality and rape. Also posing a serious security risk is the presence of some 80,000-90,000 Rwandese and Ugandan rebels in the DRC. Some 1,100,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 430,625 refugees must go home and 204,341 refugees within the Congo must be fed and sheltered. With 72% of the Congolese undernourished and 70% without sanitation, a fundamental paradigm shift from a 'war economy' to an accountable use of resources for service delivery is imperative.

Corruption is still endemic. A July 2005 report by a UN panel stated that 60-80% of customs revenue was embezzled. The DRC ranks 156 in the 2006 Transparency International's list of the most corrupt countries. Reversing corruption and ensuring public accountability demands the strengthening of the judicial system, including refurbishing the Supreme Court's provincial offices.

Staying the Course

MONUC's mandate is up for renewal by the UN Security Council in mid-February. The new UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, hinted that MONUC's new mandate will stress the training of the national army, disarming of armed combatants and resettling the displaced.

However, MONUC must clarify its exit strategy and time-table. There is a palpable air of resentment of the overbearing presence of external players, with Congolese politicians publicly calling for the country's sovereignty.

The expiry of CIAT's mandate after the election has created a vacuum. An alternative body is urgently required to mediate post-election conflicts. The EU is perhaps one of the most important partners in the Congo's reconstruction. Foremost is its strategy for Africa, aimed at assisting the continent to meet the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. The strategy should have peace-building in the DRC as a central strand.

Another milestone has been the creation of the UN Peace Building Commission (PBC) in December 2005. African countries have to do the heavy lifting to draw international attention to the continent's recovery agenda, including in the DRC. The African Union, which adopted a post-reconstruction strategy in July 2006, must intensify resource mobilisation to support the DRC and other countries emerging from war.

As a principle peace broker in the DRC, prompter of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council since January 2007, South Africa has the clout to sway global opinion in favour of Africa's recovery.

When all is said and done, if not channeled properly, the competing economic interests of various actors can derail peace and plunge the DRC back into chaos.

[Dr Peter Kagwanja is the Director of Democracy & Governance and Head of the Africa Division at the Human Science Research Council and \(Honorary\) President of the Nairobi-based Africa Policy Institute.](#)

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