

Democratic Republic of Congo : eternal return of the same ?

Friday 25 October 2024, by [BOND Patrick](#), [POLET François](#) (Date first published: 7 October 2024).

The DRC is the subject of renewed interest, linked to the risk of regionalization of the M23 war in the east and to the focus on the conditions of extraction of minerals that are crucial to the energy transition. Natural resources are the sometimes distorting prism through which Congolese reality is viewed. At the risk of underestimating the mechanisms of internal predation, which the arrival at the top of the State of a representative of the historic opposition has not altered overall.

"Let's start talking about Congo". The posters that appeared on the street furniture of Europe's capital alongside other messages calling on people not to stop talking about Gaza are indicative of a change in the degree of attention paid to the Congolese conflict abroad. The media-diplomatic mobilization around the wars in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine has given arguments to activists of the "forgotten wars". The context is all the more favorable to media coverage of the Great Lakes crisis, as the new M23 insurrection in the eastern part of the country has more obvious international ramifications than previous cycles of rebellion - due to the deployment of regional forces in support of the Congolese army, but also to the unprecedented level of tension between the authorities of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and those of neighboring Rwanda, whose support for the rebellion is no longer in question.

Awareness of the Congolese cause is also being raised by international civil society campaigns around "blood minerals" and child labor - aren't energy transition and global demand for critical minerals a major factor in conflict in this part of the world ? Through their support for Rwanda and their consumption of natural resources, Western countries are complicit in a humanitarian tragedy that they refuse to fully recognize and therefore treat seriously.

While the international determinants of the Congolese crisis are indisputable, narratives limited to them run the risk of simplifying the dynamics of conflict and underestimating the local factors behind the violence. The M23 is one of more than a hundred armed groups active in the provinces of eastern Congo. Access to minerals is not the only fuel for intercommunity tensions. Western multinationals are in the minority among the companies that extract and buy strategic minerals. The main mines, in terms of production and sales, are far from the most violent areas. Last but not least, the wars in the East need to be reinscribed within a wider predatory political economy, in which Congolese politico-military personnel are the main players, producing injustice, tension and social suffering throughout the territory.

The ambition of this issue of Alternatives Sud is to draw up a global socio-political panorama of the DRC, in its internal configurations as well as in its relations with the rest of the world, the latter of course being articulated with the former. The authors of the ten articles gathered here, all Congolese, set out to uncover and analyze the evolutions as well as the factors of reproduction of the Congolese political field and public action on a national and international scale.

While in some respects the book resembles an assessment of the Tshisekedi presidency, which is regularly contrasted with the Kabila administration, several contributions discuss issues from a longer-term perspective, notably land conflicts, women's participation in public affairs and forest diplomacy. On the whole, the nineteen contributors to this book note that, despite the hopes raised by the arrival at the top of the State of a representative of the historic opposition and the emergence of new social actors with demands, the "continuities" and "permanences" of the Congolese system outweigh, for the worse, the factors of change.

From one disputed election to another

A look back at the first six years of the Tshisekedi administration (2019-2024). As early as January 2019, the very circumstances of the alternation at the top of the State augured a presidency with little regard for democratic principles, despite the emancipatory political imaginary that the name "Tshisekedi" and the brand "UDPS" [\[1\]](#) continued to enjoy in large sections of Congolese public opinion. In fact, the investiture of the candidate of the opposition coalition "Cap pour le changement" was the result of a deal with Joseph Kabila, who controlled the "independent" electoral body (CENI), at the expense of the real winner of the election (by far), Martin Fayulu, considered less manipulable and more hostile by the outgoing president (Englebert, 2020). As a reminder, this agreement enabled the latter and his Front Commun pour le Congo (FCC) coalition to retain control of parliament and the majority of the Republic's key institutions (judiciary, army, police, intelligence services).

As Georges Kasongo Kalumba points out in his contribution, the Congolese political system has experienced a series of crises in this unusual configuration of cohabitation between the old and new presidents. To alter the balance of power to his advantage, gain access to the public resources he needed to implement his program and prevent Joseph Kabila from renewing his grip on the electoral commission and the constitutional court, Félix Tshisekedi combined street strategy with political maneuvering, mobilizing UDPS militants to put pressure on the institutions he did not control. He also enjoyed the support of Western countries, particularly the United States, anxious to undo the "Kabila system".

The new president finally took over the reins of state at the end of 2020, with the official break up of the government coalition with the FCC, the announcement of the formation of a new political platform - the Union sacrée de la nation (USN) - and the spectacular inversion of the parliamentary majority in favor of the latter. This was achieved "in a highly legally questionable manner, alternating between intimidation (physical pressure on political opponents, threats of prosecution against former public officials, threats to dissolve the National Assembly) and financial incentives (distribution of envelopes and, later, vehicles, etc.))" according to Georges Kasongo.

Although Félix Tshisekedi regained full executive power and from then on occupied the center of the national political game in Kinshasa, the remainder of his first term was to be disrupted by a new threat, this one peripheral, in the form of the resumption of the M23 rebellion in the Rutshuru hills of North Kivu, on the border with Rwanda. The political consequences of the insurrection, which was gaining ground against the Congolese army and exposing the President's impotence in matters of security and territorial integrity, did not prevent Félix Tshisekedi from taking advantage of his parliamentary majority to create the institutional conditions for his re-election, notably by imposing a loyalist at the head of the Central Electoral Commission, much to the dismay of the Catholic Church, opposition parties and citizens' movements.

At the end of an electoral campaign marked by anti-Rwandan and nationalist one-upmanship, as if Rwanda were "the sole cause of the Congo's problems", in the words of one of the authors of this

book [2], Félix Tshisekedi won the December 2023 elections in conditions of such chaos and opacity that the process is not considered credible by many observers : “On December 20 we did not witness an election but a parody of an election. Thousands of polling stations didn’t open, voting machines didn’t work, millions of Congolese spent a whole day in front of polling stations without voting, while thousands of machines were in the hands of private individuals who voted in place of the people” [3]. The result was nevertheless validated by Western chancelleries, against a backdrop of growing strategic rivalry with China.

An enlarged version of the Union Sacrée was subsequently negotiated by the re-elected president, giving him a new overwhelming parliamentary majority. However, this absorption capacity was offset by the outbreak of a long and highly conflictual “positioning war” between the components of the new presidential camp, for the formation of the government team and the National Assembly bureau, which delayed the start-up of the institutions until June 2024.

Evanesence of public policies, lively clientelism

The new president’s first term of office began under the banner of the fight against poverty and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reactivating the idea of “social progress” claimed in the UDPS label. A stated ambition to which the growth of the national budget and the resumption of international cooperation would normally have contributed. According to the members of the Ebuteli Institute who jointly contributed to *Alternatives Sud*, while progress has been made in certain areas, the daily lives of the Congolese people have hardly improved at all. The authors take a closer look at the government’s flagship socio-economic programs - the “100 Days” program, free primary education and the “local development of the 145 territories” program.

On the whole, these much-advertised initiatives have only been partially implemented, and have had perverse effects on the quality of services and equipment. This is partly due to the fact that “the lifestyle of Congolese political institutions continues to consume a large part of the revenue mobilized, to the detriment of public investment” [4], and partly to the scale of the misappropriation of funds earmarked for these public policies. On the purchasing power front, the executive has multiplied “voluntarist and targeted” measures to counteract the effects of rising inflation (abolition of vat, etc.), without tackling the “deeper problems linked to the malfunctioning of local production systems”.

Félix Tshisekedi has made the fight against corruption a top priority, a commitment that is pleasing to the ears of his Western backers, as demonstrated by the activation of the Inspectorate General of Finances (IGF) and its famous “financial patrols”. On the subject of the IGF, the participants in this book are divided. Some believe that it has contributed to greater transparency in the management of public revenues, while others see it essentially as a “political instrument” in the hands of the presidency, and consider, like Albert Malukisa, that the regime’s dependence on regional or local leaders, which enables it to gain clientelist legitimacy, makes “the fight against corruption politically counterproductive”.

This would explain why the large-scale embezzlement cases uncovered by the IGF are rarely followed by convictions. If they were systematically carried out, the investigations and subsequent trials would lead to the defection of corrupt elites who are essential to the regime’s political stability. All the more so when these defections potentially lead to violent protests by those excluded from the space of power [5].

For the way the Congolese political system operates appears to have remained unchanged under Tshisekedi, despite the break in his alliance with the Kabila clan. As Georges Kasongo analyzes in his contribution, the president remains the keystone of the political game, around which, through

informal transactions, networks of political elites are built, giving access to positions that enable the accumulation of wealth and prestige. “At the start of Félix Tshiskedi’s second term in office, irremovable political elites from past republics, up to and including that of the much-maligned Marshal Mobutu, found themselves at the helm of all institutions, including the government, in contradiction with the proclaimed desire to break with the defects of the past regimes”.

When it comes to reproducing previous ways of exercising power, the Tshisekedi regime resorts to political tribalism just as much as its predecessors, or even more than Joseph Kabila according to some analysts. The Balubas are over-represented in key ministerial and administrative posts. This ethnic favoritism is intended to guarantee political loyalties and protect the regime, but is also the result of pressure from the Kasai elites, who feel that it is “their turn”, after several decades of opposition and exclusion from institutions. This situation “awakens reflexes of paranoia and collective psychosis among members of neighboring tribes”, according to Georges Kasongo. This is particularly true in wealthy Katanga, where the historical social domination of the Baluba tribe from Kasai was used as a pretext for pogroms in the 1990s.

Another extension of deleterious past practices, less expected from a formation like the UDPS, which suffered political persecution like no other under Mobutu (a reality the Groupe d’étude sur le Congo and the Ebuteli Institute return to in their article on the genesis and trajectory of the historic opposition party) : the growing intimidation of critical voices. The degree of political violence has increased markedly since 2023, with the arrest of opponents, activists and journalists, and the repression of demonstrations. Sometimes bloody, as in the “Goma massacre” [6]. Reports from Congolese and international human rights organizations are increasingly alarming, as in the statement by the EurAc network of NGOs published on the very day these lines were written, deploring the reinstatement of the death penalty and the erosion of public freedoms in the DRC (EurAc, 2024).

Natural resources, a reality and a prism

As C. Géraud Neema comments in this book, the wealth of the Congolese subsoil has come to constitute the prism, “perhaps distorting”, through which internal political and economic realities as well as relations with the rest of the world are viewed, by foreign players as well as by the Congolese themselves, the former insisting on the “curse” of natural resources and the blood that stains their own cell phones, the latter on the foreign plundering that explains the unbearable contrast between the country’s natural wealth and the widespread destitution of its population.

In recent years, however, a number of studies have questioned the primacy of the desire for minerals in the conflicts ravaging the east of the country. Josaphat Musamba in particular (Musamba and Vogel, 2021), who in *Alternatives Sud* demonstrates that militia violence and inter-community clashes are the product of a tangle of factors, foremost among them the struggle for land and for customary or modern power, against a backdrop of historical population displacements, demographic pressure and the political manipulation of autochthony. This is not to say that the exploitation and trafficking of coltan or gold do not play a part in maintaining these dynamics, but their influence varies greatly from one scene to another, and is often difficult to distinguish from the widespread ransoming used by armed groups... and part of the Congolese army.

The need to take account of the complexity of local contexts does not detract from the massive financial importance of mines on a national scale. Minerals account for over 98% of Congolese exports and 46% of government revenues, according to figures from the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) relayed by C. Géraud Neema. These amounts mainly refer to copper and cobalt extracted from the mega-mines in the south of the country (ex-Katanga), which are more

industrialized (80%) and formalized than the mines in the Kivus in the east. President Tshisekedi's activism to renegotiate the "contract of the century" concluded with China under Kabila, while resulting in a financial rebalancing to the benefit of the Congo, has the disadvantage of overlooking the disastrous socio-environmental impact of the cupro-cobalt industry and suggesting that the obstacles to the socialization of mining wealth lie solely in the voracity of multinationals.

However, several international studies, including the famous "Congo Hold-Up" investigation, have highlighted the scale of the misappropriation of mining revenues during the Kabila presidency. And when asked whether mining governance had improved under Tshisekedi, Jean-Claude Mputu, spokesman for the NGO network "Le Congo n'est pas à vendre", replies that "nothing has changed". Corruption still takes place, "at every level", in every interaction between the Congolese administration and mining companies, from the granting of licenses to the recording of production figures, from environmental controls to the management of Gécamines' participation in mining joint ventures. Perhaps the most eloquent illustration of the continuing "hold-up" is Félix Tshisekedi's recent approach to President Biden to overturn US sanctions against Israeli businessman Dan Gertler, accused of corrupting public officials in the Congo and elsewhere in Africa.

Jean-Claude Mputu also observes that the new requirements for foreign mining companies to use Congolese subcontractors are being watered down by politically selected front men, while government rhetoric on the imperative of local processing of natural resources has so far not gone beyond the level of... rhetoric. To complete this picture, we would like to emphasize the extent to which the minerals prism has contributed to the political neglect of the Congolese agricultural sector since independence, despite its importance in terms of employment and the country's food dependency, which forces it to import corn or fish from countries with far less agricultural potential. In this respect, it has to be said that the slogan of "revenge of the soil on the subsoil" put forward by the authorities under Tshisekedi has not made it beyond the stage of conferences and programmatic documents (Saliboko, 2023).

While the issue of access to minerals has been an important aspect of Congo's international relations since independence, it has taken on a new dimension in the context of global competition over "transition minerals" and Sino-American strategic rivalry. In his article, C. Géraud Neema explains how the Tshisekedi administration relied on US support during the period of cohabitation with Joseph Kabila, whereas the latter, fifteen years earlier, had favored the Chinese to emancipate himself from Western tutelage. Nevertheless, the last two years have shown that the current president has not aligned his country with the Western camp, despite the latter's counter-offensive to regain a foothold in the mining sector, due in part to a lack of support in the diplomatic struggle against Rwanda and criticism (albeit mild) of democratic governance.

Nevertheless, minerals are not the only natural resources that enhance the DRC's importance in the context of the global energy and environmental transition : the huge expanse of primary forests in the Congo Basin is also the subject of growing interest from a multiplicity of international players engaged in deforestation reduction (REDD+) and biodiversity conservation programs.

In their contribution on forest governance in the DRC, Eliezer Majambu, Moïse Tsayem Demaze and Symphorien Ongolo present the Congo as an arena in which these actors intervene to try to assert a set of formal (reducing deforestation) and informal (consolidating diplomatic influence) interests. According to the authors, the strategy of Congolese decision-makers consists of demonstrating "circumstantial docility", responding to pressure from foreign partners by implementing reforms for good forest governance, a guarantee of attracting international funding, without giving themselves the institutional means to effectively channel the exploitation of forest resources.

Social change and new actors

If the mechanisms of state and international domination seem to perpetuate themselves to the detriment of a population negotiating its survival and dignity on a daily basis within the framework of an insecure modernity (Bréda et al., 2013), social and cultural changes within Congolese society are giving rise to new forms of critical awareness and citizen resistance, against a backdrop of the massification of higher education, the generalization of access to social networks and the growing international circulation of people.

Clémentine Sangana, Catherine Odimba and Pacifique Nkunzi look back in particular at the evolution of public and political participation of Congolese women, an issue in which the appointment of Judit Suminwa Tuluka as Prime Minister in April 2024 constitutes a step of considerable symbolic significance, in a context where the legitimacy of women to manage public affairs remains fragile. Our three authors nevertheless note a striking contrast between the abundance of international and national texts promoting gender equality and the modesty of concrete progress. While women's organizations are increasingly numerous and benefit from the support of international cooperation to carry out advocacy activities, particularly for the adoption of laws against gender-based violence, the lack of coordination between programs leads to the scattering of actions and complicates the construction of a united and strong movement.

President Joseph Kabila's second term was marked by the advent of a new socio-political actor in Congo : the "citizen movements". Two members of the main one - the Lucha - look back at the genesis, characteristics and challenges of this "atypical" militancy, which has variations in other African countries. Bienvenu Matumo and Steward Muhindo explain that the emergence of this new type of collective action is born of indignation at the inability of the ruling elites to provide answers to the essential needs of the population and the discrediting of traditional civil society organizations - primarily concerned with maintaining good relations with the authorities and donors - and opposition parties, including the UDPS, whose leaders exploit the anger of young people. The Lucha stands out from these actors because it exerts pressure on decision-makers through non-violent public actions, while remaining independent of political parties and international cooperation, and without aiming to participate in the established power.

Lucha and other citizens' movements took part in the demonstrations that contributed to the change of power at the beginning of 2019, but the arrival in power of Félix Tshisekedi generated new challenges for the organization. The movement was effectively divided on the position to adopt in the face of a president who, despite the undemocratic modalities of his victory, was going to put an end to twenty-one years of Kabilism and was perceived by some activists as likely to set the country on the path to change. Lucha therefore refocused on social demands in the Tshisekedi era, without neglecting the critical examination of public policies carried out at the national level. After twelve years of existence, Lucha is now facing organizational challenges linked, among other things, to the necessary renewal of its activist base.

The constitution in danger (again)

The future of Lucha will also depend on the evolution of the national political context and what the two activists call the "dictatorial inclinations" of the UDPS regime. The political future of Congo is indeed fraught with uncertainty. In May 2024, President Tshisekedi announced his desire to set up a national commission to "reflect" on the Constitution, with a view to updating certain provisions that would hinder the proper functioning of institutions. The Congolese fundamental law is undoubtedly not perfect in every respect, but the problems highlighted by the presidential clan seem so secondary in view of the security and social emergencies of the moment that Congolese civil society

and opposition see in Félix Tshisekedi's approach the first signs of a project ultimately aimed at revising the provisions that limit the duration of his stay at the head of state.

And for good reason, it was through the same type of sibylline remarks on certain inadequacies of the Constitution that members of Joseph Kabila's party had initiated the strategy of maintaining his power ten years earlier. The combined pressure of street protests and the international community had forced the former president to reconsider his project (Polet, 2022).

Today, Félix Tshisekedi seems better positioned than his predecessor to free himself from the constitutional straitjacket. Faced with the overwhelming parliamentary majority of his presidential coalition, the political and social opposition is fragmented and weakened. His "paradoxical" popularity in Kinshasa [7] and the activism of the UDPS youth leagues make resorting to the streets risky. Finally, the pressures from Europe and the United States are already less strong and risk being less effective, in a context of a "new cold war" and the rise of a global South hostile to the democratic injunctions of the West. The president's main challenge will therefore be the management over the long term of the competing ambitions of the "allies" who make up his political base.

And yet, the Tshisekedi regime does not seem entirely safe from a reversal of fortune, as the improbable coup attempt carried out on May 19, 2024 in Kinshasa seems to have wanted to remind us. Developments on the Congolese political scene regularly surprise the most seasoned analysts.

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Footnotes

[1] The Union pour la démocratie et le progrès social (UDPS) was the first opposition party created under Mobutu's dictatorship (in 1982). It remained in opposition under the presidencies of Laurent Désiré Kabila (1997-2001) and Joseph Kabila (2001-2018). Étienne Tshisekedi, father of the current president, was one of its founders and its main leader from the 1980s until his death in February 2017. See GEC and Institut Ebuteli's contribution on the history of the UDPS in this book.

[2] Trésor Kibangula, interviewed by Deutsche Welle on October 10, 2023.

[3] Jean-Claude Mputu, another contributor to this book, in an interview with the blog belgicatho.be on January 7, 2024.

[4] The running of institutions absorbs 70% of the Congolese state budget. Parliament alone consumed \$1.1 billion between 2021 and 2023, nearly a third of which corresponded to opaque or unauthorized spending, according to a study by a Congolese research center based on official data (CREFDL, 2024). This lends credence to the statement by the Observatoire de la dépense publique (ODEP), according to which the remuneration (all benefits included) of national deputies fluctuates between \$20,000 and \$30,000 per month, or even more (actualité.cd, June 20, 2024).

[5] Since the end of Mobutism, a number of political players (ex-Mobutists, Tshisekedists, Kabilists) excluded from the current presidential coalition have joined a rebellion in the east of the country to better negotiate their return to power. The latest is Corneille Naanga, ex-president of the electoral commission under Kabila, whose Alliance Fleuve Congo, created at the end of 2023, formed an alliance with the M23 and became its political showcase.

[6] On August 30, 2023, the Republican Guard massacred around fifty unarmed militants from a politico-religious group preparing to demonstrate in the streets of Goma against the presence of Monusco, the UN force deployed in the region.

[7] In May 2024, a survey conducted by the Bureau d'études, de recherches et de consulting international (BERCI), the Ebuteli Institute and the Groupe d'étude sur le Congo (GEC) showed that almost half of those questioned felt satisfied with the direction the DRC, led by Félix Tshisekedi, was taking. A figure equivalent to that of 2019, when he came to power (Afrikarabia, June 2, 2024).