



## HOPE, FEAR MARK CONGO'S FIRST DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS IN 46 YEARS

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*The people of the African nation of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, one of the most dangerous places in the world, voted Sunday in their country's first multiparty election since 1960.*

Election officials were surprised that despite widespread illiteracy and the sheer number of candidates -- 32 for president and more than 9,700 for national assembly seats -- the vote ended on time with only isolated violence, Reuters reported.

Congolese people showed off purple indelible ink on their thumb as marks of a successful vote.

A United Nations representative for the Congo, Ross Mountain, told Reuters: "We believe the enthusiasm being shown at this election shows the willingness of the population to move ahead, to move out of 40 years of misrule and misery."

### **A history of violence**

Much of the country's violence can be traced to ethnic clashes that have raged throughout central Africa, and to ongoing power struggles for natural resources such as gold, diamonds, copper, zinc and timber.

The Congo won independence from Belgium in 1960, but soon thereafter an army colonel named Mobutu Sese Seko seized power in a coup d'etat.

He renamed the country Zaire and for more than 30 years, ruled with an iron fist and put aside nearly all of the country's wealth for himself.

Mobutu's reign unraveled in the 1990s due in part to events in neighboring Rwanda.

Rwandan Hutu rebels, known as the *Interhamwe*, fled to Zaire after orchestrating the mass killing of about 500,000 to 800,000 Rwandan Tutsis and moderate Hutus in 1994.

Mobutu allowed the Hutu rebels to remain in eastern Zaire.

Angry with Mobutu for providing sanctuary for their enemies, the Rwandan government supported a rebellion lead by Laurent Kabila, who finally ousted the brutal Mobutu regime in 1997.

## **New leader and stunted peace efforts**

Laurent Kabila was hailed as a hero.

The people of newly renamed Democratic Republic of the Congo hoped he would reverse Mobutu's years of terror and corruption.

Kabila's backers in Rwanda and Uganda also felt they could count on the new leader to drive out Hutu rebels.

Within a year, however, Kabila changed his mind and refused to expel the Hutus.

The Rwandans and Ugandans immediately switched sides, and supported rebels seeking to overthrow Kabila, starting a new civil war in 1998.

Fighting continued despite a 1999 cease-fire between the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Congolese rebels, and the countries of Angola, Namibia, Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

Kabila was assassinated in 2001 and his son, Joseph Kabila, was named head of state in his place.

## **Still the most dangerous place in the world**

Under Joseph Kabila, the Democratic Republic of the Congo found new hope for peace.

In 2002, Kabila negotiated the retreat of Rwandan rebels from the Congo's east, and signed an accord with the country's warring factions to establish a transitional government with international oversight.

Though these agreements formally ended the civil war, militias continued to kill and loot, especially in the eastern regions of the country near the borders with Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda.

According to a 2005 report by the International Rescue Committee, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is the deadliest place in the world, with about 1,000 people dying every day because of preventable disease and famine brought on by the continuing violence.

Some 4 million Congolese, half of them children, have died since 1998.

The United Nations has maintained a peacekeeping mission in the Congo since in 1999 and has spent \$6 billion there since 2001.

"Peacekeeping may be expensive, but try war, it's a lot more expensive," Mountain, the U.N. representative in the Congo, told Reuters.

## Optimism and concern over the future

Sunday's elections were overseen by the largest peacekeeping force in the world: a 17,000-member U.N. force backed by 1,100 European Union troops, Reuters reported.

Incumbent Joseph Kabila appears to be the front-runner for the five-year term presidency.

In the week leading up to the election, however, supporters of other candidates protested, throwing rocks and gas bombs, and blockading a highway, claiming that the international monitors were trying to manipulate the elections in Kabila's favor.

"Perhaps we're heading for a masquerade or a parody of elections," three main opposition candidates, Jean-Pierre Bemba, Azarias Ruberwa and Arthur Z'ahidi Ngoma, wrote in a joint statement.

These candidates, former militant leaders who are now vice presidents in the transitional government, accused the electoral commission of printing too many ballots and setting up fake polling stations.

Analysts fear these leaders, who have support in Kinshasa, Congo's capital, could revert to violence if they do not have a role to play in the new government.

"There will be winners and losers, and many of the losers have guns. ... The probability is high that conflict will break out again," Jason Stearnes, an analyst with International Crisis Group, told Reuters.

But the Congolese people showed optimism for their country.

"I do have hope for these elections," said Laurent Paluku, head of an electoral commission office in the eastern town of Beni, on the July 25 NewsHour with Jim Lehrer.

"We will have elected leaders, even if they're not good leaders. And I think that's a lot."

*-- Compiled by Adnaan Wasey for NewsHour Extra*

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