

Strategic Pressure: A Blueprint for Addressing New Threats and Supporting Democratic Change in the DRC

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An effective strategy to bring Congo back from the brink of political and economic crisis should focus on achieving a democratic transition while also pushing for key structural reforms and immediate conflict mitigation steps in the Kasai region and the east. This is a critical step to begin to break the cycle of the highly corrupt, violent state in Congo. President Kabila's subversion of the December 31 accord is plunging Congo back into a dictatorship. It is not yet in the regime's financial interest to pursue a democratic transition given the immense profits reaped by the Kabila family and its commercial partners despite the economic crisis, Kabila's control over the security services, and the opposition's current weakness. Significantly increased financial, diplomatic, and other pressure on the regime and its partners are needed first. The U.S. and European Union, countries in the Great Lakes region, and the private sector should work on four tracks to support Congolese efforts to achieve a democratic transition:

Use financial pressure to change the Kabila regime's cost-benefit calculations

The United States and European states should enact a series of escalated anti-money laundering measures and targeted network sanctions against members of President Kabila's inner circle and companies they control. The aim of the pressure should be to lead to timely, credible elections and a democratic transition.

As more pressure is applied, support negotiations to create a path to credible, timely elections and Kabila's exit from the Presidency

Negotiations will eventually be necessary to prevent wider violence and for the government, opposition, and civil society to work out a plan for elections and a credible political transition and to ensure Kabila leaves office. An independent African mediator trusted by all sides should be appointed to help broker a time-bound transition plan, supported by Angola and neighboring states and inclusive of civil society groups whose legal services and physical protection should be supported by the UN and U.S..

"With all the evidence in [recent reports and news articles] that we learn about, why aren't the E.U. and the U.S. targeting Zoe Kabila or Jaynet Kabila to send a strong signal to Joseph Kabila that he must get his act together and abide for once in his tenure to an agreement like the December 2016 one?"

- Congolese civil society leader in August 2017 interview with the Enough Project

Enact targeted measures to help resolve conflict in Kasai and eastern Congo

This should include support for accountability measures and investigations for those fomenting violence, and efforts to cut off the conflict gold trade through UN Security Council sanctions on conflict gold smuggling networks in Congo and neighboring countries.

Combat corruption by pushing for transparency reforms of state-owned mining companies

The United States and European Union should use financial pressure until independent audits of the state-owned mining company Gécamines – a company at the heart of how Kabila's inner circle generates illicit wealth and why it wants to stay in power – are conducted and those audits are published. Technology and mining firms should also press the regime because they indirectly work with Gécamines.

Four key developments in Congo make the deployment of this strategy timely: 1) The December 31 deal signed by the government and opposition offers a clear roadmap and benchmarks for a democratic transition; 2) There is now a near consensus in the international community and Congolese civil society that the Kabila regime is thwarting democracy and stability; 3) Significant further financial leverage is available to influence the process which has not yet been utilized, and the regime's leaders and business partners could lose access to the global banking system if that financial pressure is applied by governments and banks; 4) The powerful Catholic Church in Congo, which helped negotiate the Dec. 31 accord, is now telling the population to stand up to the regime, combined with increasing activism by Congolese pro-democracy civil society.

Read the report: <http://eno.ug/2ffaGsw>

Overview: “Strategic Pressure: A Blueprint for Addressing New Threats and Supporting Democratic Change in the DRC”

Nearly nine months after signing a political deal aimed at ushering in a landmark democratic transition in the Democratic Republic of Congo, President Joseph Kabila’s subversion of the accord places Congo at risk of much greater violence. It is also now creating the potential for regional instability and the possible disruption in the supply of minerals strategically important to U.S. national security and to U.S. and other global manufacturers.

Kabila’s attempt to stay in power at all costs is moving Congo from a fragile democracy to a dictatorship. It has already sparked significant repression, caused armed conflict in the Kasai region where 1.4 million people have been displaced, and all major U.S. companies with direct investments have fled Congo. Unrest that is rising in several areas of the country could also spread to mineral-rich Katanga, where 50 to 60 percent of the world’s cobalt reserves lie, creating a threat to U.S. defense, auto, and electronics industries.

Over the past year, the international community as well as Congo’s opposition and civil society have deployed some elements of a necessary strategy of pressure and negotiation to support a transition. However, those measures have not nearly been applied at the level needed to change the calculations of Kabila and his inner circle sufficiently to motivate them to move forward with credible elections. There is international pressure, but it is too individualized, ad hoc, and not focused enough on squeezing the regime at its most vulnerable point: the global financial system that Kabila and his associates heavily rely on to move money.

A much more robust strategy is needed to prevent a far costlier disaster with U.S. national security and regional instability implications, and to help Congo move toward a democratic transition.

A mediation effort led by Congo’s Catholic bishops succeeded in getting the Dec. 31, 2016, accord signed, but it failed afterward because of a lack of subsequent pressure on the Kabila regime for implementation, and because the process did not include civil society. A new, inclusive, African-led mediation initiative is needed once more pressure has been applied.



Peaceful marches like this one on July 31 have been met with arrests and repression. Credit: LUCHA

The power grab by President Kabila and his Congolese and international collaborators is driven by their desire to not cede the immunity and control over the estimated \$24 trillion in natural resource wealth that state authority gives them. They want to continue profiting from the violent kleptocracy they inherited and have refined over the past 16 years, through a system in which the ruling networks and their commercial partners hijack the state for their own benefit and use violence to profit and maintain power. The situation has become increasingly dangerous, as Kabila has attempted to repress and divide the opposition and civil society, and the government and opposition are no longer in dialogue. Neighboring Angola and Uganda are very concerned about Kabila’s

lack of control of the situation, and the son-in-law of Angolan president José Eduardo dos Santos, Sindika Dokolo, has launched a campaign for Congolese people to stand up for democracy, supporting a Congolese civil society-opposition manifesto published in August calling for a “return of constitutional order.” In a country awash in arms, escalating local conflicts, angry politicians, youth, and with neighboring countries growing increasingly concerned, the risks of wider violence are high unless an inclusive transition occurs.

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