DR Congo in the Throes of Violence

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Violence erupts in DR Congo as opposition parties protest widespread irregularities that marked the November 28, presidential election in which Joseph Kabila emerged the winner

Democratic Republic of Congo, DR Congo, is in the throes of another civil war. Controversies over the November 28, presidential election result has set supporters of Joseph Kabila, the incumbent president, against those of Etienne Tshisekedi, the opposition candidate. Kabila, 40, was declared winner of the election with 49 percent of the total votes against Tshisekedi, 78, who scored 32 percent. Tshisekedi and his supporters rejected the result alleging that it was rigged in favour of Kabila. Tshisekedi’s supporters came across resistance from the security agents as they protested the alleged electoral fraud. Gunshots still rent the major streets of the country as forces loyal to Kabila intensify efforts to quell the uprising from the opposition party. About 21 people have been declared dead as burnt-out tyres, broken glass and concrete blocks litter the major streets in the country. After declaring himself winner of the election, Tshisekedi demanded that he should be sworn-in as the next president of Congo DR. He described the result as “provocative, scandalous and vulgar.” “We have done our own calculations and I received 54 percent to Kabila’s 26 percent. His term is finished. I am the president,” he said. The international election observers also supported Tshisekedi’s claim that the election was not free and fair. To them, the election was marred by irregularities which favoured Kabila. The Carter Centre, one of the international election observers, had 26 teams of observers that monitored the elections around the country. According to the centre, the votes were inflated in areas where Kabila had strong support while polling stations in Tshisekedi’s strongholds were either cancelled or not counted. The Centre reported that constituencies like the Katanga province where Kabila had his strong support, recorded high rates of 99 to 100 percent voter turnout. While most polling stations from Kinshasa, where Tshisekedi had large supporters, were cancelled. One out of every five polling stations in Kinshasa had its result cancelled. In Manono, the home town of Kabila, the votes cast was more than the registered voters resulting in a turnout of 100.14 percent. Laurent Monsengwo, the Catholic archbishop of Kinshasa, said that the results of the election neither comply with truth or justice. He has urged the opposition party to forward its complaint to the Supreme Court where justice can be delivered. The Roman Catholic Church was one of the main election observer groups with more than 30,000 monitors around the country. Three candidates took part in the presidential election; Kabila, Tshisekedi, and Vital Kamerhe. Tshisekedi is the oldest candidate of the three, born in the central Kasai region in December 1932. He studied law during the Belgian colonial rule and has been in politics since 1960 when the country got independence. He was a minister during the administration of Mobutu Sese Seko and moved to the opposition camp in 1980, after Sese Seko cancelled all elections. Since then, Tshisekedi has remained in the opposition party. Kamerhe was a formal ally of Kabila and a founding member of the ruling party. He spear- headed Kabila’s election campaign in 2006. In the parliamentary election, Karmerhe won a sit and became the speaker of the National Assembly. He parted ways with Kabila in 2009 after a controversy on a secret pact with Rwanda to send troops into eastern Congo DR to fight rebels. He then left Kabila to form the Union for the Congolese Nation, UNC, on which platform he contested the presidential election. Kabila is the youngest candidate in the presidential race at the age of 40. He has been in power for 10 years. Kabila succeed Laurent Kabila, his father, in 2001, after he was assassinated. He was picked by the presidential inner-circle to lead Congo DR as it was being torn apart by warring armies. Kabila organised the first election since independence in 2006. Most of his supporters are from the eastern part of the country where he was born. Innocent Jirgba, a political analyst, told Newswatch that electoral fraud breeds violence anywhere in the world and Congo DR is not an exception. “If African leaders continue to perpetuate themselves in power through electoral fraud, those who are cheated would always react in form of protest,” he said. He called on the peace keeping forces in Congo DR to act fast and restore normalcy as another round of violence would not mean well for the country. Violence, civil unrest and corruption has been common phenomena in Congo DR. The first army mutiny was witnessed in 1960. It was an attempt by its mineral-rich province to secede from the rest of the country. A year later, Patrice Lumumba, then prime minister, was killed by troops loyal to Joseph Mobutu, army chief. In 1965, Mobutu seized power, renamed the country Zaire and also changed his own name to Mobutu Sese Seko. He turned Zaire, into a springboard for operations against Soviet-backed Angola. But he also made Zaire synonymous with corruption. In 1997, Rwanda invaded Congo DR to flush out Hutu militias. This gave a boost to the anti-Mobutu rebels, who captured the capital, Kinshasa, installed Laurent Kabila as president and renamed the country DR Congo. The trouble did not end there, a rift between Kabila and his former allies ignited a new rebellion. The new rebels were backed by Rwanda and Uganda while Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe supported Kabila which turned the country into a vast battleground. The fear of many is that the country is about to be plunged into another round of violence. The Burden of Republicans Modupe Ogunbayo-Tona The burden of producing a viable candidate to contest in the United States of America, USA, 2012 election rests more on the Grand Old Party, GOP, as the Republican Party is also known, than on the Democratic Party. President Barack Obama of the Democratic Party has a high likelihood of getting a second term in office, so his party is not feeling the heat. The task is not an easy one for the Republicans. It had a long list of contestants featuring Jon Huntsman Jnr, former governor of Utah; Rick Perry, the Texas governor; Michelle Bachman, House of Representatives’ member from Minnesota; Ron Paul and Rick Samtorm, a former presidential candidate and senator respectively; Mitt Romney, former governor of Massachusetts and Newt Gingrich, former speaker of the House of the Representatives. But many of them have dropped out of the race, leaving only Romney and Gingrich to slug it out. So far, Romney seems to have an edge with more endorsements, especially among the core conservatives than Gingrich. Recently, John Thune, a senator from South

Dakota, endorsed Romney’s presidential ticket because he felt he is the only Republican candidate best equipped to go “toe-to-toe” with President Obama in the general election. Shortly afterwards, he got the backing of Kelly Ayotte, senator from New Hampshire. “Over the last number of months, I’ve come to the conclusion that…there is one person who I know will ensure that Barack Obama is a one-term president, and that is Mitt Romney.” The lawmaker said. Afterwards, the endorsement raised the momentum of his campaign in the state which is a crucial primary battleground. But Gingrich is not relenting in his push for recognition as well in Iowa, and other states. Recent poll releases show that Gingrich has double-digit leads over Romney in South Carolina and Florida, whose primaries hold after Iowa and New Hampshire. As the race tightens, Romney had hoped the debate on Saturday, December 9, between the two of them would help slow the former speaker’s rise. But Gingrich weathered the attacks without losing his composure, leaving Romney to look to the December 15 debate in Sioux City, Iowa, for another opportunity. Russia in Turmoil Endurance Akoro The Russian government is finding it difficult to convince its citizens that the results of the just concluded election were not manipulated. Thousands of Russians stormed the streets of Moscow and across the country on December 10, challenging the results of the parliamentary elections released the previous day. They demanded the annulment of the December 4 election and called for a rerun. The protesters vowed to continue the protest until the results are nullified. The rioters accused Dmitry Medvedev, Russian president, and Vladimir Putin, the prime minister, of allegedly rigging the election. United Russia, their party got 50 percent of parliamentary seats. Of the 250 seats that were keenly contested for by the four political parties, United Russia won 238 seats; Communists, 92; Fair Russia, 64 and Liberal Democrats, 56. But the protesters said that the results were fraudulent and would not be accepted by Russians. Medvedev conceded that election laws might have been violated. In a statement, which he released via face book, a social network, he said “People have the right to express their views which is what they are doing; nevertheless, instructions have been given by me to check all information from polling stations regarding compliance with the legislation on elections.” He also used the same post, to criticise Saturday’s demonstration, the biggest in Russia, since the end of the Soviet Union. Putin, however, accepted the results and called for dialogue with the opposition parties to arrest the situation. The prime minister, who was once the president of Russia from 2000 -2008 before stepping aside because of term limits, is a candidate in the forthcoming March 2012 presidential elections on the platform of United Russia Party. Though the protests seem to have tarnished his campaign, there is not yet any obvious strong challenger.