

August 20, 2006

Congo's Presidential Election Heads Toward October Runoff

By Jeffrey Gettleman and Anjan Sundaram

NAIROBI, Kenya — With more than half of the vote counted, the race for the president of Congo seems headed toward a runoff between Joseph Kabila, the incumbent, and Jean-Pierre Bemba, a tycoon who has been accused of war crimes.

On Saturday, the Congolese election commission released a batch of new results indicating that Mr. Kabila was ahead 48 percent to Mr. Bemba's 18 percent, with nearly 12 million of an estimated 20 million votes counted. The rules call for a runoff in October if no candidate clears the 50 percent mark.

The July 30 election, with 33 presidential candidates, was the first major multiparty contest in Congo in more than 40 years. Though the voting went peacefully for the most part, the counting has been turbulent, with some ballots burned, others missing and the results cloaked in mystery.

Initially, Mr. Kabila, who inherited power after his father, Laurent Kabila, was gunned down in 2001, was predicted to win in a walk. Then local election observers, analyzing early results, announced Mr. Bemba was ahead. Now Mr. Kabila seems solidly in front.

Even Mr. Kabila's most energetic supporters say a runoff might not be such a bad thing. If Mr. Kabila won outright, the theory goes, it could fan suspicions that he rigged the outcome, which might ignite violence and upheaval.

The reality is that most Congolese voters are deeply cynical about politics, knowing nothing but dictatorship and corruption. Congo was ruled for more than 30 years by Mobutu Sese Seko, a notoriously extravagant autocrat. Laurent Kabila, an aging rebel leader, helped overthrow him, only to plunge Congo deep into war.

Joseph Kabila is credited with bringing the fighting to an end, and huge posters across the country proclaim him the "artisan of peace."

But Mr. Bemba's formidable campaign machine raised doubts about whether the president of Congo was even Congolese. President Kabila spent much of his boyhood outside the country because his father was in exile.

"And it was this serious misinformation campaign," said Kikaya bin Karubi, one of Mr. Kabila's top aides, "that cost us millions of votes."

Mr. Bemba, though, has own image problems. The son of one of the richest men in Congo and a businessman in his own right, Mr. Bemba led an insurgent movement in

eastern Congo, and his troops have been accused of brutalizing civilians and eating people.

The Bemba camp seemed surprised it had not won more votes in Kinshasa, the capital, where the anti-Kabila rumors were especially rampant.

But Fidèle Babala, a spokesman for Mr. Bemba, said, "In the interests of peace and stability, we will not contest the results of the vote."

It is unclear whom the secondary candidates, like Oscar Kashala, a Harvard-trained cancer scientist, Justine Kasa-Vubu, daughter of Congo's first president, or Antoine Gizenga, a former prime minister, would back if the vote went to a runoff. Election analysts say their support could spell the difference between victory and defeat.

Though President Kabila and Mr. Bemba have not publicly discussed their strategies, many suspect that the two leading candidates are busy lining up allies for Round 2.

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