

Congo, With Iraq in Mind, Faces Voting and Threats

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KINSHASA, Congo, March 23 — One of the angry young men marching through the streets here in the Congolese capital the other day carried a handwritten sign that summed up this country's worst fears. "Tshisekedi," it said, "or Iraq."

The sign was a threat directed at Congo's government: meet the demands of Étienne Tshisekedi, a veteran opposition politician, or face the wrath of his unruly band of supporters in the Union for Democracy and Social Progress, who are known for their aggressive ways.

"Without Tshisekedi in this election, there will be civil war," said Diudonne Mulumba, one of several thousand marchers in support of Mr. Tshisekedi.

Congo, battered by almost unimaginable civil strife, is approaching its first nationwide elections in nearly half a century with a mixture of optimism and outright fear.

It is not only the troublemakers who are bringing up Iraq, a country where elections were billed as a savior but seem to have done little to quell violence. Even those preparing for Congo's own milestone, those eager to introduce democracy to a country that has known only strongman rule, invoke Iraq's lessons as the election in June draws near.

Events in Iraq have made it clear to many here that elections alone do not unite divided countries, despite the poignant scenes of long-oppressed people lining up at the polls.

And while the Iraqi elections were considered a significant logistical challenge given that country's insecurity, bitter sectarian divide and lack of democratic tradition, Congo is in an entirely different league of difficulty.

"Compared to the Congo, Iraq's elections were a walk in the park," said Ross Mountain, the [United Nations](#) official who helped run Iraq's elections and is now organizing a similar operation in Congo, a country more than five times as large, more than twice as populous — with scores more tribes and languages — and relatively few usable roads.

Mr. Mountain rattles off the many nightmarish difficulties he faces: getting ballots to remote villages, protecting voters from armed men who still prey on them and encouraging onetime warring parties to compete and, if the results do not go their way, to accept defeat.

The day of reckoning is June 18 — unless, that is, the date to elect a president and members of Parliament is postponed a third time.

The last day for candidates to file papers was Thursday, but that deadline was pushed back a week in an effort to draw the numerous parties that are boycotting the process into the mix,

including the part of Mr. Tshisekedi (pronounced chee-seh-KEH-dee) who has served in numerous Congolese administrations but gains most of his popularity by provoking from the outside. "We are militants," said Mr. Mulumba, a Tshisekedi advocate. "We are proud to be militants. Our combat is against dictatorship. We fight for democracy."

[Kofi Annan](#), the United Nations secretary general, swept through Congo this week trying to ensure that the elections do not reignite the nation's old conflicts. So there he was in his hotel room with Mr. Tshisekedi, urging him to join the race.

Mr. Tshisekedi, who did not immediately respond to Mr. Annan's pleas, is but one of dozens of potential candidate threatening to boycott the polling and discredit what they see as a sure victory for [Joseph Kabila](#), the 34-year-old military commander who took over the presidency when his father was assassinated in 2001.

As part of a 2003 peace deal, Mr. Kabila has the job temporarily while four vice presidents representing Congo's divided political landscape check his power. Mr. Annan met with all five men, encouraging anyone with political aspirations to do the same thing: join the race.

But some are already writing off the elections as a sham.

"This is a rigged election," said Kabamba Mbwebwe Kabuya, who had planned to run for president under his Patriotic Front party but was stymied by the \$50,000 fee required of candidates. "How can you call it a democratic election when everyone knows who will win?"

No one knows for sure, because opinion polls are nonexistent and most people have never voted before. But Mr. Kabila, who formally entered the race this week, has the power of the state behind him, and analysts suggest that the only way he could face trouble is if opposition parties merge.

Congo has 250 or so political parties, some of them actual organizations, some bands of militants and some little more than grandiose names. But despite a penchant among the people to debate their country's political failings, Congo has precious little experience with orderly transfers of power.

Leaders traditionally grabbed power here and stayed until they die, sometimes of unnatural causes. The last time the Congolese chose their leader was at independence in 1960.

This year, voters will have choices, although perhaps not as many as they would like.

One choice, Diomi Ndongala, who was fired by Mr. Kabila as mining minister amid corruption allegations, is spinning his presidential bid as a way to clean up government.

"If I broke the law, they should charge me," he said, declaring himself to be the poorest mining minister this country, with its long history of official looting, has ever seen.

"We must change the mentality of people in Congo," he said. "They can't think they can take power by arms."

Mr. Annan had a similar message as he encouraged Congo's powerbrokers to put statesmanship above personal ambition. "With elections in many countries that are coming out of conflict, if you don't have an inclusive election and try to use the process as a unifying force and try to get people to reconcile, just having elections won't do it," he said.

But getting everyone involved proved far more tricky than Mr. Annan may have imagined. Mr. Tshisekedi remains on the outside, insisting that Mr. Kabila's government meet his demands, including reopening voter registration to allow more of his backers to sign up.

The fear is not that outsiders will just denounce the election results but that they and their followers will work to challenge them. In Congo's past, that has meant violent confrontation and, sometimes, civil war.

The United Nations' largest peacekeeping mission in the world, with 17,000 troops, is already in the country and available should violence break out as the election nears. A separate [European Union](#) force of about 400 soldiers is due here before the vote to act as a rapid response force. An additional 1,000 or so European Union troops will be on standby outside the country.

The trouble spots are many: in eastern Ituri Province, where ruthless militias still operate; in the Kivus and Katanga, areas where a combination of rogue government soldiers, traditional fighters and Rwandan refugees wreak havoc on local populations; in the cities, where demonstrations are sometimes met with a fierce official response.

The United Nations has made significant headway in luring fighters to give up their guns or join the national army, but some say they are frustrated that the country, with its economy in shambles, offers them few ways of making a living.

An election is meant to be a turning point, and this one surely will. Until the 2003 peace deal, the country was divided into rebel fiefs. It is now one Congo, albeit a troubled one where more people die of conflict-related deaths — from violence or preventable diseases — than in Sudan's Darfur region or in Iraq.

"We can wait until everything is perfect but how much time will that take?" Mr. Annan said. "One year, two years, three years?"

The decision to plunge ahead with elections has been made, but Mr. Annan, perhaps again learning something from Iraq, said the peacekeepers who will referee the polling will stick around for the aftermath.