

ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Contents

Congo's Nguesso set to extend presidency, despite international concern 1

As elections near, Congo seeks to diversify its economy beyond oil 2

Congo goes to vote, questions remain on the nascent democracy 4

Internet blackout in Congo as government fears post-election unrest 5

Opposition cries foul after Congo's Sassou claims new five year term 6



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Denis Sassou Nguesso (R) at the funeral of Nelson Mandela, South Africa, December 2013. [GovernmentZA/Flickr]

Congo's Nguesso set to extend presidency, despite international concern

Denis Sassou Nguesso is widely expected to extend his nineteen-year grip on the Congolese presidency during elections on Sunday (20 March), despite international concerns about the fairness and transparency of the poll.

A survey by French public opinion gatherer TNS put Sassou Nguesso on 67%, compared to 8% for his nearest challenger. Communications Minister Thierry Mougalla said there were "indicators on the ground that the President will win on the first round".

72-year-old Sassou Nguesso has led the country for a total of 32 years, since first entering office in 1979. After finishing third in an election in 1992, Sassou Nguesso regained power in 1997, after a brief civil war, and then went on to win elections in 2002 and

2009, although the latter was strongly criticised by international observers.

Eight other candidates are standing against Sassou Nguesso in the first round of voting, including former army chief General Jean-Marie Mokoko, but complain that the short campaign period – the elections were originally scheduled for July – had given them little time to organise.

The Congolese people backed a series of amendments to their national constitution in a referendum in October, including the removal of a 70-year age limit and a ban on presidents serving more than two terms. The revised constitution also established an independent electoral commission and a single ballot system.

The European Union decided not to send an election observation mission in February, with the bloc's foreign minister, Federica Mogherini, stating that the revised Congolese constitution could create "judicial insecurity and therefore do not appear to (guarantee) a democratic, inclusive and transparent presidential election".

The EU had earlier warned that the October referendum "threatened the stability of the country", and has expressed concern about the treatment of opposition members before and after the elections.

Continued from Page 1

Contacted by EurActiv, the EU Ambassador to the Republic of Congo, Saskia De Lange declined to comment on the election process ahead of polling day.

For its part, the African Union hurriedly put together a delegation of around 40 people to observe the election, while the 57-member Organisation internationale de la Francophonie has also sent an observation mission.

At a campaign press conference on Thursday (16th March), Mougalla maintained that the election process had been fair. "It seems that the Opposition are predicting that any result that does not give them victory or a second round must have been cheated," he said, adding that "it is not fair play or democracy to say that the winner of the game did not win".

Mougalla and health minister Bienvenu Okiemy accused opposition supporters of inciting violence and riots, with Okiemy attacking critics from the international community.

"All those people who pretend to belong to the international community should not be inciting people to riot," he said, accusing them of "ignorance of our country and Congolese people."

"On March 20th, we will find out the degree of confidence the Congolese people have in each candidate," he said, adding that "Congo has chosen stability after war".

Campaigning has been largely peaceful, although opposition candidates have complained of difficulties in organising election rallies. Sassou Nguesso will conclude his campaign with a rally in Brazzaville on Friday (18 March), expected to be attended by over 50,000 people.

At a rally on Thursday (17 March), supporters of opposition candidate Guy Brice Parfait Kollelas, a former minister in Sassou Nguesso's government who opposed the changes to the constitution, urged the international community to intervene.

"Francois Hollande and Barack Obama take pity on the Congolese," they

told Euractiv.com.

Over 60% of the Congolese economy comes from the oil industry, and government revenues have been badly hit by the recent oil price slump, which has seen prices fall to around \$40 per barrel from nearly \$120 per barrel in summer 2014.

The elections in Congo-Brazzaville are the latest in a series where sub-Saharan African presidents have pushed through changes to national constitutions to allow them to run for a third term.

Ugandan premier Yoweri Museveni won a seventh term in office in February, while Rwanda's Paul Kagame is expected to run for a third term in 2017, after a referendum to change the term limits was passed in December.

Meanwhile, in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, Joseph Kabila is expected to attempt to extend term limits to allow himself to run for a third term as President in November.

As elections near, Congo seeks to diversify its economy beyond oil

Like many of its sub-Saharan African neighbours, the Republic of Congo is a country of oil price fuelled boom and bust. But the future is away from oil.

Despite boasting a small population of around 4.5 million, Congo is the fourth largest oil producer across sub-Saharan Africa. Over 70% of the Congolese economy comes from oil, and close to 80% of government revenue.

A decade of high oil prices – peaking at \$120 per barrel in 2014 – combined with the write-off of most of its foreign debts as part of the international community's heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) initiative in 2010, enabled Congo to pay for a series of high profile infrastructure projects.

President Denis Sassou Nguesso, who expects to secure re-election for a third term following Sunday's elections, has staked great importance in eye-catching infrastructure projects, bringing the pan-African games to the country, building international standard stadiums in each of Congo's twelve regional departments, while each department also has an international standard airport.

"Isn't the road from Ponte Noire to Brazzaville complete?" he asked supporters at his final campaign rally in Brazzaville on Friday (18 March).

For their part, the French development agency and the European Investment Bank are among the major development finance actors in the country. The European Union funded a highway between Brazzaville and the town of Kinkala, 60 kilometres to the west of the capital.

Chinese funds, meanwhile, helped pay for the August 15, 1960 suspension bridge, across the River Congo, named after the country's independence day.

However, political opponents of the government and economic analysts contend that Congo has failed to take advantage of its oil riches.

"Look at the potential of our country," supporters of opposition candidate Guy Brice Parfait Kollelas told Euractiv at a rally on Thursday (17th March). "We got more than \$5 billion from oil and

Continued on Page 3

Continued from Page 2

petroleum and what do we have to show for it? A couple of stadiums. We can't eat stadiums".

Over 40% of Congolese citizens live on less than 1.25 euros per day.

The era of plenty appears to be over – certainly in the short-term – for the oil industry, and economic growth in Congo has fallen sharply since the second half of 2014 when prices began to tumble. The IMF's latest mission report in July 2015 forecast average growth of around 3 percent per year between 2015 and 2020.

To the IMF's chief economist in Brazzaville, Tchicaya Gondet, the country's infrastructure programme has lacked focus, with political vanity projects often taking precedence over cost effective ones.

"We can criticise the government for not strictly analysing what we needed to build," he says, adding that "we don't need a presidential palace in every department" and that only the airports in oil-centre Ponte Noire, and Brazzaville, attract good numbers of passengers.

The government had to table two supplementary budgets in 2015, and Gondet told Euractiv that a further supplementary budget will have to

be submitted shortly after Sunday's Presidential election. As it is, the government has had to resort to loans from China and short-term advances from its central bank, he adds.

Diversify or feel the pain

The tendency of oil-rich countries, unsurprisingly, is not to diversify when one economic hen continues to lay golden eggs. Now that the oil and mining industry is in severe difficulties – and likely to remain so throughout 2016 – Congo cannot diversify its economy quickly enough. "We've been talking about diversification for 20 years," says Gondet.

There are, however, crumbs of comfort, and there is no reason why Congo cannot successfully diversify away from oil. It has some of the largest iron ore and potash deposits in the world, rich forests, a deep-water International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS), and fertile land.

If iron ore is unlikely to be a cash cow any time soon because of its exposure to China's economic slowdown, prices for phosphate rock and potash are stable and likely to remain so. Both are used in farming fertilisers and Africa's

rapid population growth over the next decades should, logically, lead to increasing acreage for food production.

Meanwhile, a handful of companies have made multi-million euro investments in Congolese cement industry.

The Republic of Congo ranked 176 out of 189 in the World Bank's 2015 'Doing business' survey, and government's first priority should be improving the business environment, Gondet states. The problem is not setting up a business, but a 'para-fiscal' system of informal taxes and levies emanating from local authorities, the police and port authorities, that exists alongside government tax collection.

As a former French colony – it is no surprise that French oil giants Total, and Perenco, together with Italian ENI have dominated the economic landscape in Congo. But the tide of 'black gold' is running dry. Congo – and its neighbours – will have to diversify or feel the pain.



NGOK is a Euro Pale Lager style beer brewed by Brasco in Congo Brazzaville

Congo goes to vote, questions remain on the nascent democracy

“We don’t want money, we want change,” said Jean-Michel Mokoko, one of eight candidates contesting Denis Sassou Nguesso’s bid for a third term as President of the Republic of Congo, at his closing campaign rally on Friday (March 18).

He is almost certain to be disappointed. Election analysts and surveys suggest that Sassou Nguesso will claim between 60-70% of the vote in the first round of elections on Sunday.

So is Sassou’s likely victory a triumph or defeat for Congolese democracy?

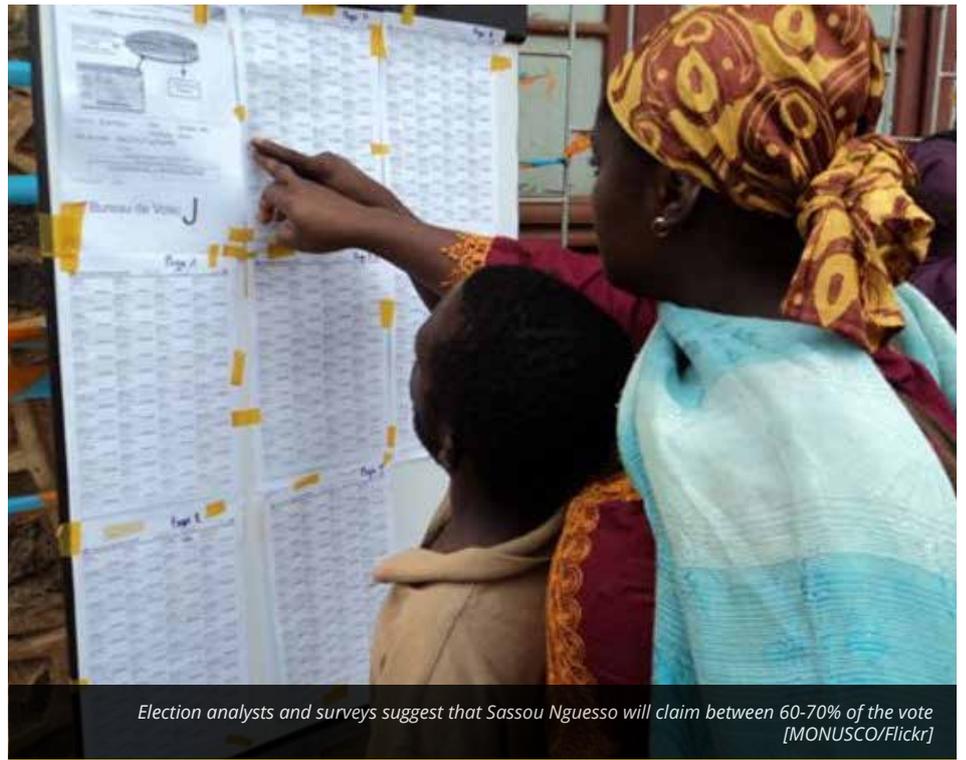
Most media attention surrounding the October referendum on changes to the Congolese constitution focused on the extension of the term limits, which allowed Sassou Nguesso to run for a third term.

Sceptical Europeans

But the rest of the document deserves consideration, particularly from sceptical Europeans.

The new constitution scrapped the death penalty, placing Congo among a group of nineteen countries to have abolished capital punishment.

Meanwhile, changes to the election system include replacing the French-style system of multiple ballots with a single ballot paper from which voters select a candidate – an attempt to ensure that the ballot remains secret. The new constitution also established an electoral commission which the



Election analysts and surveys suggest that Sassou Nguesso will claim between 60-70% of the vote [MONUSCO/Flickr]

government says is politically balanced between opposition and government parties and civil society representatives.

Opposition parties maintain that the electoral commission is still a tool of the government.

Elsewhere, fixed terms have also been scrapped, with the President able to call an election at any time during a five year term.

“If the President wants to call an election and take the risk of being defeated then it’s up to him,” Henri Bouka, the president of the Congolese election commission, told Euractiv.

If the eight opposition candidates are clear in their view that the poll will not be fair, Bouka insists that there has been no impropriety.

“I can say that all candidates have had the freedom to do what they wanted to do during the campaign,” he told Euractiv.

Bouka also points out that the decision to bring forward the election from July to March did not prevent an extra 244,000 people from being added to the electoral register during a month long enrollment drive which finished in mid-February.

Government ministers insist that all

candidates have had access to national media, yet Sassou’s US-presidential style rally on Friday dominated the airwaves.

“Our democracy has never been stronger or more vibrant than it is today,” says Congo’s Communications minister Thierry Mougalla.

That said, there have been numerous accusations of dirty tricks.

Mokoko received a police summons, a month after facing police questioning after a video appeared on the Internet allegedly implicating him in an attempted coup. His campaign team insists that the video is fake.

Social media sites have also seen claims that the electoral register had not been completed ahead of the vote, with opposition candidates urging people who have registered but do not see their names, to insist on their democratic rights.

The refusal of the EU to send an election observation mission is the cause of much chagrin for the government, and for Sassou’s supporters.

“They [the EU] should be fair,

Continued on Page 5

Continued from Page 4

we requested an observation team. This election is about the will of the Congolese people. Why can't they respect that," says Laurette Angouono, a civil servant, pointing out that Senegalese president Macky Sall has attracted little international criticism despite himself changing the national constitution.

With Congo less than two decades removed from a brief civil war in the mid 1990s, and having embraced Marxism in the 1970s and 80s, Angouono comments that "it's normal that our democracy will come little by little".

"One should not underestimate the challenges of establishing a viable democracy in a country without a democratic history and culture, with deep divisions created by civil war, and in a region of Africa characterised by instability and conflict," says Communications minister Mougalla.

So the question of Congolese democracy is neither black or white. But Bouka is adamant that the election itself will be fair.

"The honest candidates will recognise that the results are correct. The election mechanism is so transparent that there is no way to manipulate the result. The candidates have the right to have a party agent attend the count at each polling station," he notes, pointing out that "some of the candidates have been travelling in private jets, so they can afford to pay for party agents".

"I want to do my work honestly, and the result we will announce will be the real result."

Many people, inside and outside Congo, are not convinced.

"If we are logical, Mokoko will win," says Nzambi Ress, a student, although he tells Euractiv that Sassou will win. He adds that he refused an offer of 10,000 francs (\$20) to give up his voting card.

"We are safe but there is no freedom," says Ress. "Sassou has been in power too long".



Republic of Congo President Denis Sassou Nguesso votes at a polling station in Brazzaville, Congo [Reuters]

Internet blackout in Congo as government fears post-election unrest

The Congolese government imposed a 48-hour communications block of the internet and telephone networks as the country's voters went to the polls for presidential elections.

Interior Minister Raymond Mboulou ordered the two-day blackout from 1am on Sunday (20 March). He instructed telecoms firms to block all telephone, Internet and SMS services for "reasons of security and national safety".

French radio station RFI, which has aired increasingly critical coverage of incumbent President Denis Sassou Nguesso in recent months, also had its airwaves temporarily cut.

The silence on the airwaves and internet chatrooms was matched by quiet in the near-deserted streets of capital city Brazzaville.

The government hopes that the communications lockdown will prevent

opposition groups from using social media sites, such as WhatsApp and Facebook to organise post-election demonstrations.

Cutting the networks will do little to placate the concerns of international observers and opposition supporters that the elections have been neither free or fair.

The European Union did not send an election observation mission to the former French colony, stating in February that political conditions in the country "do not appear to (guarantee) a democratic, inclusive and transparent presidential election".

The ruling French Socialist party called for the elections to be cancelled.

However, the African Union and the 57-member Francophone community sent official observation teams. Dileita Mohamed Dileita, the former prime minister of Djibouti who headed the African Union mission, praised the manner in which the campaign had been conducted.

Although a victory for Sassou Nguesso by a wide margin is widely considered to be a formality, the official results are not expected to be released before Tuesday (22 March) evening.

Speaking on Sunday, Sassou

Continued on Page 6

Continued from Page 5

Nguesso said that the election process represented “enormous progress for democracy” in Congo.

The election comes less than six months after Congolese voters backed a referendum to change their national constitution, allowing Sassou Nguesso to stand for a third term.

The turnout is expected to be higher than previous elections in 2002 and 2009, both won by Nguesso and boycotted by opposition parties.

Opposition supporters have hinted that they will take to the streets in the event of a Sassou Nguesso victory, having complained about irregularities including alleged vote buying, intimidation and a lack of media access

during the campaign.

Henri Bouka, the president of the Congolese election commission, told Euractiv that the elections had been fair.

Leading opposition candidates Guy Brice Parfait Collela and Jean-Michel Mokoko have urged against any post-election violence.

On Friday (18 March), Collela and Mokoko were among a group of five candidates who pledged to back the second placed candidate, in the unlikely event that N’guesso does not claim an overall majority in the first round of voting.

Mokoko received a police summons on the eve of the poll, a month after facing police questioning after a video, which he says is a fake, appeared on the

internet allegedly implicating him in an attempted coup.

“I can say that all candidates have had the freedom to do what they wanted to do during the campaign,” he told Euractiv.

N’guesso’s supporters say that he has brought peace and stability to a country that fell into a brief civil war in the 1990s. “Here we have peace... the streets are safe,” says Laurette Angouono, a civil servant. “We never had this under Lissouba (the former President),” she adds.

“We don’t need a soldier now, we need a civilian,” carpenter Abou Courre told Euractiv. “I just pray that there won’t be violence,” he added.

Opposition cries foul after Congo’s Sassou claims new five year term

Denis Sassou Nguesso has been elected for a new five year term as President of Congo-Brazzaville, after being declared the victor in Sunday’s presidential election.

According to official results published on Thursday (24 March) by the Congolese electoral commission (CNEI), Sassou Nguesso claimed 60%, with Guy Brice Parfait Collelas and General Jean-Michel Mokoko claiming 15% and 14% respectively.

The controversial election was marked by opposition accusations of vote buying, rigging of the electoral register and intimidation of opposition parties, although the chief of the electoral commission insisted that the election had been free and fair.



Congo [Ben Fox]

“The honest candidates will recognise that the results are correct. The election mechanism is so transparent that there is no way to manipulate the result,” Henri Bouaka, the president of the CNEI, told Euractiv.com.

“I want to do my work honestly, and the result we will announce will be the real result.”

“The freedom of movement of candidates was not undermined....as

a whole, the campaign complied with our laws and with freedom of speech,” he added.

Despite the large margin of victory, the poll is the most closely fought since 1992, when Sassou Nguesso finished third in the first round of voting. Sassou Nguesso returned to power in 1997 following a short civil war.

Continued on Page 7

Continued from Page 6

The 2002 or 2009 elections were barely contested by opposition parties.

"I knew beforehand that the dice were loaded, but we had agreed to play the game," General Mokoko, the chief of staff of the Congolese army between 1987 and 1993, who resigned as Sassou Nguesso's adviser on peace and security in February.

During a speech given just before the results were announced, he told voters that "It's time to stop being afraid. You have massively rejected he who is pretending to have won."

Mokoko was the last to throw his hat into the election ring in February, and ran as an independent.

Meanwhile, a government-imposed blackout of the internet and phone networks remained in place on Thursday, five days after being put in place by Interior Minister Raymond Mboulou.

Although little violence was reported, in part due to an increased police and military presence in Brazzaville, two journalists from Le Monde, a Paris-based newspaper, and Agence France-Presse, were assaulted by plainclothes police officers as they left a press conference held by Mokoko.

Despite changing the constitution, via a referendum in October, to allow him to run for up to two five year terms, the election is expected to be the 72-year old Sassou Nguesso's last.

Without a political party behind him, Mokoko lacked the organisation needed to run an effective campaign, but is seen as the most likely man to lead the opposition over the coming years and challenge for the Presidency.

Sassou Nguesso's son Denis Christel, who currently runs the country's state oil company, has also been touted as a potential successor.

"This vote took place in a worrying context, particularly due to the cut

in communications," said France's foreign ministry spokesman Romain Nadal, in a statement on Thursday.

For its part, the EU, which refused to send an election observation mission, stated that there had been "a foreseeable lack of independence and transparency in the elections."

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