

[David Kode](#) [1]

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For Congolese, it is difficult to anticipate and plan for an election when they do not know if the incumbent President Joseph Kabila would run again despite term limit restrictions. Or if it is not certain that the vote would go ahead after previous broken promises of a scheduled vote. It gets even harder if Kabila's regime continues to violently repress any opposition in the lead-up to the ballot.

Elections are planned for December 2018, but the patterns of human rights abuses, targeting of citizens, arrest of activists and violent suppression of peaceful protests have become uncomfortably familiar. The Catholic church, which mediated a 2016 political agreement signed by key opposition groups and the government, has been leading peaceful demonstrations over the last few months, only to be met with a violent response from the state. During their most recent march on 25 February 2018 calling on President Joseph Kabila to resign, at least one protester was killed, several injured and two priests arrested.

The call from the protesters remains the same - that Kabila steps down before elections are organised. Protesters are angry and frustrated with the government, which has violated most provisions of the political agreement that was by all stakeholders in 2016. That agreement outlined ways in which a transition would be managed until scheduled elections in 2017. These provisions were openly violated - no elections were held as planned in December 2017 and Kabila's regime has used violence and intimidation to silence those calling for reforms and his resignation.

Indeed, ahead of a protest planned for 31 December 2017, security forces surrounded more than 130 churches in the capital Kinshasa, imposed road blocks, arrested dozens of political activists and priests and shutdown the internet to prevent communications about the demonstrations. The [protests](#) [2] went ahead regardless, with several reports indicating that more than eight people were killed and at least 30 injured.

At the centre of this crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was the failure or the unwillingness of the government to hold elections when President Kabila's constitutionally mandated term in office officially [ended](#) [3] in December 2016. In December 2017, the electoral commission announced 23 December 2018 as the date for elections. The announcement was welcomed by the African Union (AU), the Southern Africa Development Committee (SADC) and South Africa - all key players who can and should do more to address the Congolese quagmire. Until now, President Kabila has not publicly announced if he intends to not seek a third term and step down when elections are announced.

**What is the state of civil society as a result of this crisis?**

## Decisive leadership needed from SADC to address DRC crisis

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As the debates over the elections began in the DRC in 2016 and the government made plans to change electoral laws, President Kabila's regime targeted civil society organisations and human rights defenders that spoke out about the need for democratic reforms and the respect of the country's constitution. Most civil society leaders were arrested and some were even assassinated. This has led to the emergence of youth-led social movements like [Lucha](#) [4] and [Filimbi](#) [5]. The rise to prominence of these social movements — loose and less formal associations with thousands of members in the different regions of the country and across the world — has changed the dynamics of civil society in the DRC.

In August 2017, the social movement, "[Les Congolais debout](#)" [6], which now has over a million members, was formed by anchoring its mandate and objectives on Article 64 of the Congolese Constitution, which calls on all Congolese to resist those who seize power by force or who exercise power in such a way that it violates the constitution. In the same month, Lucha and Filimbi, together with the main opposition group Ressemblement, signed a declaration promising to ensure that Kabila leaves power, a transitional government is formed and elections are held.

### The challenges in the DRC go beyond elections

While the focus is on the elections and President Kabila, the bigger challenge remains the country's worst humanitarian crisis. In January this year, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) [announced](#) [7] that as a result of the violence, high levels of food insecurity, malnutrition and gender-based violence, more than 13.1 million people were in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. The Kasai region, a flash point for violent conflict, could degenerate into all-out bloodshed. Fifteen people were killed during the region's latest upsurge in violence and thousands more have been killed since August 2016. Continued ethnic violence in the east of the country remains a threat to national and regional stability.

### Time is running out for SADC and the AU take action

Jacob Zuma, then SADC Chair visited the DRC last year to talk to the different parties but no concrete action followed. The costs of political instability in the DRC and the region will be huge. Now that South Africa has new leadership, President Cyril Ramaphosa – who also takes over as head of SADC – should exert pressure on Kabila to draft a transition process leading to the elections. Over the last four months, two incumbent presidents in the SADC region have been forced to step down, creating renewed hope for change in Zimbabwe and South Africa. It is time for SADC to be brave and forthright and ensure that the winds of change are experienced in the DRC. To set the scene for a political transition, South Africa, SADC and the AU should call on President Kabila to publicly state that he will not seek a third term in office. They should urge Kabila to drop all charges against members of the political opposition, civil society and other citizens currently in detention for participating in protests or calling on him to step down.

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(function(d, s, id) { var js, fjs = d.getElementsByTagName(s)[0]; if (d.getElementById(id)) return; js = d.createElement(s); js.id = id; js.src =  
"//connect.facebook.net/en_US/sdk.js#xfbml=1&appId=1465091963738031&version=v2.0";
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fjs.parentNode.insertBefore(js, fjs); }(document, 'script', 'facebook-jssdk'));
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### Article-Summary:

The announcement of a date for general elections in a country roiled in political conflict and ruled by an unpopular leader should be regarded as a positive move. But not so in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

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[2] <https://monitor.civicus.org/newsfeed/2018/01/10/deathly-crackdown-protests-new-years-eve/>

[3] <https://wagingnonviolence.org/2016/12/congo-kabila-postpone-election/>

[4] <http://www.luchacongo.org/>

[5] <https://www.facebook.com/Filimbi-406044376222695/>

[6] <https://lescongolaisdebout.com/>

[7] <https://www.unocha.org/story/drc-largest-ever-funding-appeal-requests-us-168-billion-assist-105-million-people-2018>

[8] <https://www.pambazuka.org/tags/democratic-republic-congo>

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