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PEACE & SECURITY REPORT

THE REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO CONFLICT INSIGHTS

AUGUST 2021

The purpose of this report is to provide analysis and recommendations to national, regional and continental decision makers in the implementation of peace and security-related instruments. The opinions expressed in this report are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Peace and Security Studies.

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CONTRIBUTORS

CYNTHIA HAPPI (AUTHOR)

NOTHANDO MAPHALALA (EDITOR IN CHIEF)

MOUSSA SOUMAHORO (ASSOCIATE EDITOR)

TIGIST KEBEDE FEYISSA (ASSOCIATE EDITOR)

SITUATION ANALYSIS

FIGURE 1. COUNTRY PROFILE AND DEMOGRAPHICS

POPULATION	HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX (HDI)ⁱ	GDP PER CAPITA
5.7M	INDEX: 0.574 RANK: 149/189	\$3,298
NEIGHBOURS	LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH (YRS)	RECS
ANGOLA CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO GABON CAMEROON	64.6	ECCAS

ⁱ United Nations Development Programme. Retrieved from <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/COG>

The Republic of the Congo, also known as Congo-Brazzaville is a country located in the western coast of Central Africa and home to over 60 different ethnic and linguistic groups.¹ The official language of the Republic of Congo is French with majority of the country's population practicing Christianity. Congo-Brazzaville has experienced coups d'état, civil unrests and militia conflicts since achieving independence from France in 1960. The legitimacy of President Denis Sassou Nguesso, who first came to power in 1979 in the aftermath of a coup d'état and returned

to power in 1997 after a brief power tussle with the then-president, Pascal Lissouba, is strongly contested on political and socio-economic fronts. His government is marred by recurrent political violence which revolves around contestation for power during and after elections. Socio-economic crisis further intensifies the ongoing political grievances throughout the country. While regional and international organizations are preoccupied by conflict dynamics in neighboring countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic, internal crises' in Congo Brazzaville pose a major threat to national and regional stability.

¹ <https://www.axl.cefan.ulaval.ca/afrique/congo.htm>

CAUSES OF THE CONFLICT

Political Factors

President Denis Sassou Nguesso, who first came to power in 1979, has dominated Congolese politics for 36 years, making him one of the longest serving presidents in Africa. He led the constitutional amendments in 2002² and 2015³, which enabled him to consolidate power by allowing him to run for presidency in 2016, 2021 and potentially in 2026. Some Congolese continue to vote for him because they believe that “even if there is hardship, there is no war like in other countries. It’s better to stay with Sassou, who keeps the peace in the country.”⁴ He overwhelmingly won elections in 2002, 2009 and 2016 despite alleged electoral irregularities and low opposition participation. His re-election in 2016 triggered unrest in Brazzaville and armed conflict in the region of Pool. Despite recurrent post-election unrests, President Denis Sassou Nguesso was chosen unanimously by his Congolese Party of Labor (PCT) as its candidate to run for the March 2021 presidential election which he won with more than 88% of the votes cast. Recurring constitutional amendments that extended presidential terms and removed the 70 years age limit are not only important determinants for President Sassou Nguesso’s continued stay in power but also one of the triggering factors for the country’s ongoing political crisis and internal power struggle.

Socio-Economic Factors

Congo’s socio-economic challenges are one of the main causes of the current crisis in the country. The country’s economy, which is heavily dependent on the oil sector, experienced rapid decline since mid-2014 as a result of the global fall in oil prices. About 46.5 %⁵ of the country’s population live below the poverty line with extreme poverty rate appearing to have increased from 2016, especially in rural areas, as a result of the decline in oil prices.⁶ Congo-Brazzaville’s economy resumed an upward trajectory in 2018 alongside favorable market conditions and oil prices holding steady.⁷ However, economic activities in the non-oil sector continue to decline due to the global growth slowdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the country has seen no significant progress in the areas of health and education. For instance, maternal and infant mortality rates remain high, with 5% of children not making it to their fifth birthday⁸ while malnutrition and stunting affects about 21% of children.⁹ Limited access to basic services such as health care and education therefore creates seething resentment towards the government and impacts negatively on the prospects of democratic consolidation in Congo Brazzaville.

² The 2002 amended constitution extended presidential term to seven years and removed the post of prime minister.

³ The 2015 amended constitution extended presidential term limits to three terms of five years each and the age limit of 70 years was removed.

⁴ <https://www.africanews.com/2021/03/19/congo-sassou-nguesso-favoured-to-be-re-elected-for-fourth-term/>

⁵ <https://www.indexmundi.com/g/r.aspx?v=69>

⁶ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/congo/overview>

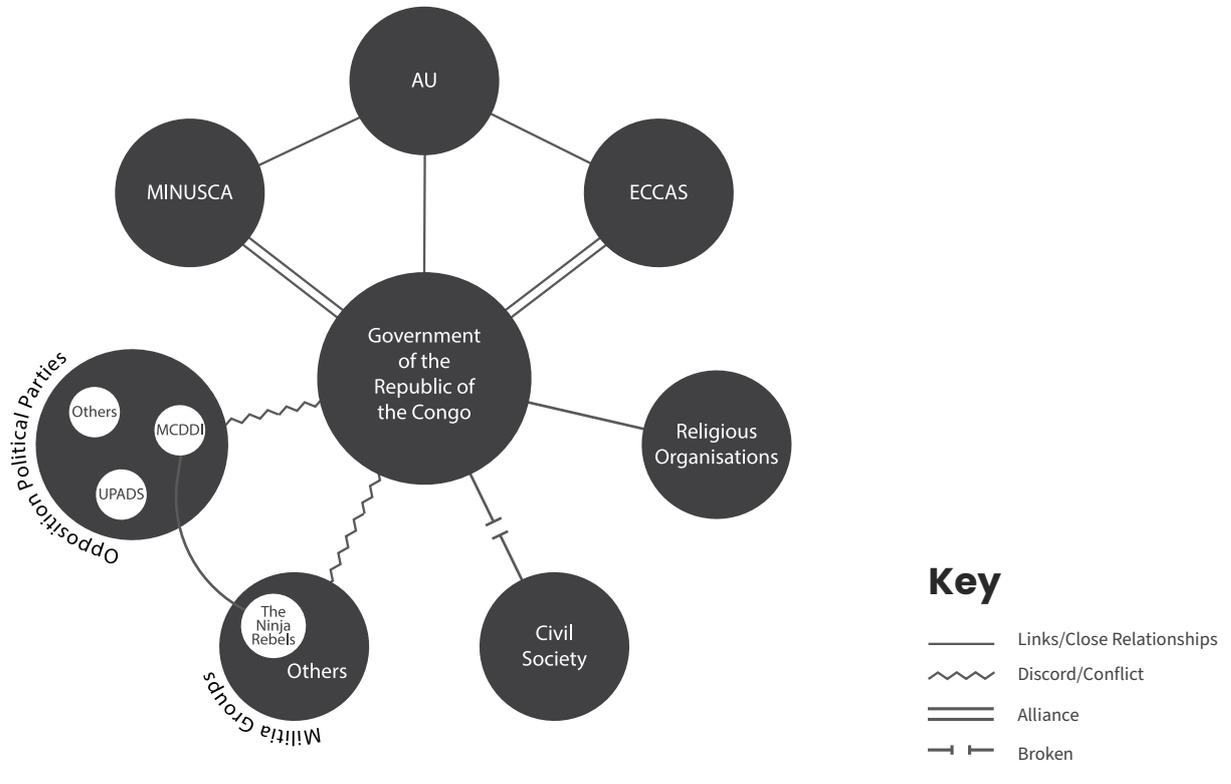
⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/COG>

ACTORS

FIGURE 2. ACTORS MAPPING



The Government

Congo-Brazzaville is a presidential republic with the President serving as both the head of state and head of government. President Denis Sassou-Nguesso's Congolese Party of Labor (PCT), founded in 1969 is the country's ruling political party. The party controls majority of the parliament and ministerial positions with 96/151 seats¹⁰ at the unicameral National Assembly. The Republic of Congo, under the plan, "Vision 2025 Congo", aims at becoming an "emerging country by 2025."¹¹ In this regard, the plan establishes a dynamic and attractive partnership framework that aims to attract both national and international investors in order to promote sustainable development. The Congolese government equally implements policies to improve security and uses its armed forces of approximately 12,000 active duty troops (8,000 Army; 800 Navy; 1,000 Air

Force; 2,000 Gendarmerie)¹² to deter unrest and maintain national integrity. The Congolese forces supported an international peacekeeping force of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) in the Central African Republic (CAR) and is a troop contributing country (TCC) to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA).¹³ Congo-Brazzaville is member to several regional and international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF), World Trade Organization (WTO), African Union (AU), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and CEMAC. It also maintains strong diplomatic and economic ties with countries such as France, China and the United States of America (USA).

¹⁰ http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2071_A.htm

¹¹ <http://zes.gouv.cg/en/about/congo/economy>

¹² <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/congo-republic-of-the/>

¹³ The Congolese government has provided troops and funding to CAR peacekeeping operations.

Opposition Political Parties

Opposition political parties are regarded as a veritable political tool and avenue for the expression of dissent. In Congo-Brazzaville, opposition political parties have attempted over time to serve as a voice to the majority of people who desire a change in the current leadership and governorship albeit without much progress. The Pan-African Union for Social Democracy (UPADS), founded in 1991 has been the country's main opposition party since 1997 when incumbent President Sassou Nguesso's rebel forces ousted the country's president at the time, Pascal Lissouba of UPADS. UPADS is the largest opposition party in Parliament with 8 seats¹⁴ at the National Assembly, followed by the Congolese Movement for Democracy and Integrated Development (MCDDI) which is the second largest opposition with 4 seats at the National Assembly.¹⁵ These opposition political parties have repeatedly boycotted elections in Congo-Brazzaville, protesting against alleged electoral irregularities. The most recent 2021 presidential election was notably boycotted by the main opposition party who argued that conditions were not conducive for polls and that an election would only lead to more divisions in the country.

Congo-Brazzaville operates a heterogeneous and fragile multi-party system where the ruling political party, has won elections since 2002 with the opposition political parties providing no real challenge. The opposition political parties are also limited in their capacity to change the narrative of the incumbent as they are plagued by limited resources, lack of organisation, inadequate personnel, low media coverage, internal friction as well as arrests and detention of party leaders.¹⁶ The 2021 presidential election was no exception, as President Denis Sassou Nguesso won by a landslide of 88.57% votes while his main rival, Guy-Brice Parfait Kolelas¹⁷ of MCDDI, who died from COVID-19 complications on March 21, 2021, polled 7.84% of the votes cast.

Militia Groups: The Ninja Rebels

The Ninja is a political militia group that was formed by politician Bernard Kolelas in the 1990s and under the field command of Frédéric Bintsamou (alias Pastor Ntoumi). The private militia has political objectives and struggles for political domination.¹⁸ Although it was reported that the Ninja disbanded in 2008, they re-emerged in 2016, starting the rebellion in the department of Pool, following

the 2016 presidential elections. Very little is known about how they are structured and operate, or how much real control Ntoumi exerts at the local level. Reports suggest that he acquired weapons from police and military outposts, received supplies from disgruntled quarters of the military, and amassed a small group of ethnic Lari young men.¹⁹ Between April-May 2017, Ntoumi's militia launched an assault against the military that left 18 soldiers dead and advanced to Madibou, near the Djoué Bridge, just 14 miles from the capital, Brazzaville.²⁰ These threats to national security led to the signing of a ceasefire agreement in November 2017 between the Congolese government and the Ninja militia. While there are a number of armed militia groups in Congo-Brazzaville, the Ninja are the most prominent.

Religious Organizations and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Religious organizations and civil society organizations (CSOs), including sector-based pressure groups and campaigners for human rights, democracy and development have played a role in mitigating the political and socio-economic crises' in Congo-Brazzaville. For instance, the Catholic Church offered more than 1000 independent election observers during the 2021 presidential elections, an offer that was rejected by the government. As a result, the Congo's Catholic Church episcopal conference expressed "serious reservations" about the transparency and fairness of the votes. The country equally abodes several CSOs, many of which operate under the umbrella of the Program Concerté Pluri-Acteurs (PCPA) Congo, an association that supports local organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in their role as agents of change for sustainable social and economic development. Organizations such as the Congolese Observatory of Human Rights (OCDH) have been active in mobilizing street protests to decry living conditions and President Sassou Nguesso's continuing grip on power. However, the government's repressive measures, such as violent crackdowns on protests and strikes, have limited these organizations from freely expressing their opinions.

14 http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2071_A.htm

15 Ibid

16 <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/africa/cg-political-parties.htm>

17 Guy-Brice Parfait Kolelas was the former leader of MCDDI and 2016 presidential elections Runner-up (15% of the votes). He was the main opposition candidate for the 2021 election and died of COVID-19 on polling day.

18 [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/137173/MilitiasRebelsIslamistMilitants%20\(Nov2010\).pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/137173/MilitiasRebelsIslamistMilitants%20(Nov2010).pdf)

19 <https://africanarguments.org/2017/06/something-is-happening-in-congo-brazzaville/>

20 Ibid

CONFLICT DYNAMICS

The Republic of Congo has experienced recurring instability and periodic conflicts between the government and groups competing for political power and access to resources. However, the March 2016 presidential elections won by President Sassou Nguesso, was the landmark for the more recent phase of the country's political crisis. In October 2015, a contested constitutional referendum extended term limits to three terms²¹ and removed age constraints that would have prevented President Sassou Nguesso from contesting in the 2016 presidential election.²² On the day of announcement of the presidential elections results, a series of attacks were allegedly carried out by the Ninja militia on government-owned buildings in Brazzaville. In response, the government launched a major military operation against the Ninja rebels. Thus, civil unrest in the country as a result of President Sassou Nguesso's re-election in 2016 as well as the revival of the Ninja rebels sparked the conflict in the region of Pool. The security operation in Pool was seen as an opportunity by the government to reinforce its rule and suppress potential opposition. It resulted in thousands of casualties, around 138,000 displaced people, and the burning and looting of homes and villages.²³ A ceasefire agreement signed in December 2017 between Ntoumi and the government ended the conflict and was followed by a disarmament process in August 2018. Peace and security have since gradually returned in the still fragile region of Pool.

President Sassou Nguesso was, again, the frontrunner in the 2021 presidential elections which was boycotted by the main opposition political party and conducted under a nationwide internet blackout. He was re-elected with 88% of the vote on March 23, 2021, beating six contenders to a 4th term in office since his victory in 2002.²⁴ His re-election was expected since the country's main opposition party, UPADS boycotted the election. While the boycotting of the 2021 presidential election seems to have prevented the repetition of post-electoral violence, general discontent over the country's economic crisis remain. This is compounded by the worsening effects of COVID-19, which exacerbated weak governance and intensified the call for political change. Moreover, cross-border instability and conflict dynamics in neighboring countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR) have resulted in the settlement of thousands of refugees in Congo-Brazzaville. These refugees and asylum-seekers (About 27,000 refugees from CAR, as well as 21,000 refugees and 8,000 asylum-seekers from DRC²⁵) place additional pressure on the country's limited social services and exacerbate tensions in the country.

²¹ With this amended constitution, President Sassou Nguesso could run for presidency in 2016, 2021 and potentially in 2026.

²² <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/special-report/2018/06/18/updated-congo-brazzaville-s-hidden-war>

²³ <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report-COG-2020.html>

²⁴ The 2016 election victory gave President Sassou Nguesso his first 5 year term. His recent victory in 2021 gives him his second 5 year term till 2026.

²⁵ <https://www.unicef.org/media/78076/file/2020-HAC-Republic-of-Congo.pdf>

ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT RESPONSES

Regional Response

The African Union (AU) deployed an Election Observation Mission (EOM) to monitor and report on the electoral process during the 2016²⁶ and 2021²⁷ presidential elections in the Republic of Congo. The EOM's mandate was to observe the presidential election in line with relevant AU instruments, especially the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG). According to the 2021 AU EOM, the presidential election of March 21, 2021 was more calm and peaceful than the 2016 presidential election.²⁸ The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) equally authorized the deployment of an EOM in the Republic of Congo to oversee the 2016 and 2021 presidential elections in order to contribute to the consolidation of democracy in its member states.²⁹ The respective missions released statements to present their conclusions on the polling and formulated recommendations, such as the need to pursue reforms initiated with a view to strengthening democracy and democratic institutions in Congo.³⁰ However, the question remains around whether recommendations from these regional actors, who often remain silent on constitutional amendments, will be implemented.

International Response

Unlike in 2016 when the European Union (EU) did not send observers to the Republic of Congo to monitor the presidential election, an EU EOM was deployed for the 2021 presidential election. As per a statement that was issued by the EU, the electoral reforms in Congo, including the introduction of an independent electoral commission, were insufficient to guarantee a democratic, inclusive and transparent presidential election in 2016.³¹ In addition, the United States (US) State Department said it had received numerous reports of irregularities after the 2016 presidential elections and criticized the government's decision to cut all communications services during and after voting.³² The Republic of Congo equally has a strong bilateral relation with France who is its largest donor of official development assistance.³³ The French government supports the strengthening of the rule of law, state bodies and public services while also working towards improving social services (public health, educational and cultural cooperation). Other international partners such as the United Nations (UN), EU, US and China have also provided financial and humanitarian support to Congo with the general objective of supporting socio-political development and contributing to a more diversified economy.

26 <https://au.int/ar/node/21376>

27 <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20210318/arrival-statement-au-electoral-observation-mission-republic-congo>

28 https://au.int/sites/default/files/pressreleases/40134-pr_declaration_preliminaire_moeua_congo_mars_2021.pdf

29 <https://ceeac-eccas.org/presidence/communique-de-presse-annoncant-larrivee-de-la-mission-internationale-dobservation-electorale-de-la-cee-ac-dans-le-cadre-de-lelection-presidentielle-du-21-mars-2021-en-republi/>

30 https://au.int/sites/default/files/moeua_en_republique_du_congo_declaration_preliminaire_.pdf

31 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/development-policy/news/eu-refuses-to-send-observers-to-congo-vote/>

32 <https://www.france24.com/en/20160404-violence-erupts-congo-capital-brazzaville-sassou-nguesso>

33 <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/congo/>

SCENARIOS

Best Case Scenario

The best case scenario would be the peaceful and democratic transfer of power from the incumbent and long-serving presidency of Denis Sassou Nguesso upon the termination of his presidential terms. A peaceful pathway to succession after a long period of monopoly of power, will result in the opening up of political space for increased democratization in the Republic of Congo. It will also mitigate electoral conflicts, ethnic tensions and the socio-economic situation that are all triggers of violence in many parts of the Central African country.

Most Likely Scenario

The most likely scenario would be the continuation of an autocratic leadership. Under this scenario, the Republic of Congo will continue to experience fragile peace and insecurity, without necessarily escalating into a civil war. Moreover, corruption and the lack of economic diversification will continue to constrain the country's economic development and the non-oil sectors will remain in recession.

Worst Case Scenarios

The worst-case scenario for the Republic of Congo would be the re-escalation of hostilities between the government and groups competing for political power. A worst-case scenario could also involve a coup d'état by popular support, as in the case of Mali to unseat the president. Under these worst-case scenarios, political and economic instability will worsen, which would negatively impact investment and prompt further decline in the economy. These scenarios could jeopardize the country's "Vision 2025 Congo" and further deepen human rights violations across the country. It could also imperil the implementation of continental development frameworks such as the African Union Agenda 2063, 'the Africa We Want', and the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda in Congo.

To the National Government

The government of the Republic of Congo should implement the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) in order to enhance democracy and democratic governance in the country. The government should equally engage civil society organizations and opposition political parties in order to ensure meaningful political and socio-economic participation.

The government should ensure that security operations aimed at preserving national stability are conducted with full respect to international and regional laws to which it is signatory. This will not only be in line with Article 3(f) of the PSC Protocol but will equally contribute to the improvement of the human rights situation in the country.

To the African Union and ECCAS

Although the principles of sovereignty, non-interference and territorial integrity are enshrined in the statutes of the AU and ECCAS, there is a need for these institutions to press for the respect of human rights in Congo-Brazzaville. They should equally press for the efficient implementation of continental laws to which the Republic of Congo is a signatory. This will prevent the re-escalation of hostilities between the conflicting parties and ward off a spillover of Congo's internal crisis into the region.

CONFLICT TIMELINE

1960-2017

1960 – The Republic of Congo gained independence from France with Fulbert Youlou as president.

1963 - President Fulbert Youlou forced to resign following workers' unrest; Alphonse Massamba-Debat becomes president and Pascal Lissouba prime minister.

1968 - Massamba-Debat ousted in a coup led by Marien Ngouabi who sets up the Congolese Workers Party (PCT).

1977 - Ngouabi is assassinated by a four men suicide commando squad and Joachim Yhombi-Opango becomes president.

1979 - Joachim Yhombi-Opango hands over the presidency to the PCT and the PCT chose Denis Sassou-Nguesso as president.

1992 - A multi-party political system is established and Pascal Lissouba becomes president in Congo's first democratic election.

1997 - Full-scale civil war breaks out; pro-Sassou Nguesso forces, aided by Angolan troops, captured Brazzaville, forcing Lissouba to flee. Sassou Nguesso proclaimed himself President.

2002 January - Constitutional amendment extended presidential term to seven years and removed the post of prime minister.

2002 March - Denis Sassou Nguesso wins presidential elections. Intense fighting between government and "Ninja" rebels drives thousands of civilians from their homes in Pool region.

2003 March - Government signs deals with Ninja rebels aimed at ending fighting in Pool region.

2015 October – Constitutional amendment extended presidential term limits to three terms and the age limit of 70 years was removed.

2016 March - Denis Sassou Nguesso wins presidential election described as fraudulent by the opposition.

2016 April - Government buildings in Brazzaville are attacked in post-election unrest.

2017 December - The government and the Ninja rebels sign a ceasefire deal.

2021 March 23 - Denis Sassou Nguesso wins Presidential election boycotted by the main opposition.

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Peace and Security Reports

Although key continental and regional institutions have their own early warning reporting systems, policy making within these institutions also benefit from a number of analytical and periodic reports generated by think tanks and research institutes. The Research Unit at IPSS provides brief and critical analyses of the state of peace and security in different African countries as well as critical appraisals of interventions by various African actors. The reports will cover African countries showing positive signs as well as those undergoing negative developments.



IPSS

Institute for Peace
& Security Studies
Addis Ababa University

Addis Ababa University
P. O. Box: 1176
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

+251 (1) 11 245 660
info@ipss-addis.org
www.ipss-addis.org