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Congo's elections and its political landscape: some key-insights

On 23 of December, Congo is scheduled to go to the polls to choose their next president, as well as national and provincial representatives. For the presidential elections, they will face the choice between Joseph Kabila's handpicked successor [Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary](#) and [20 other candidates](#).

Total reading time: 10 mins

Changing alliances in DRC

Shadary is backed by the Front Commun pour le Congo (FCC, Common Front for the Congo) – a newly formed electoral pact consisting of several [heavyweights in politics, business and academia](#). Shadary is heavily handicapped as he's not only seen as a [continuation](#) of Joseph Kabila's seventeen-year unpopular rule, but importantly, he lacks a strong [independent political and financial base](#). However, despite these disadvantages, Shadary's chances may have increased drastically with the recent dynamics within the opposition: barely 24 hours after the formation of an [electoral pact](#) and announcing [Martin Fayulu](#) as their common candidate, [Felix Tshisekedi](#) and [Vital Kamerhe](#) [withdrew](#) their support and formed their own electoral pact, [CACH](#).

Based on our research on access to political positions in the DRC, we will explain how these quickly changing alliances are not an exception, but a key-feature of the Congolese political landscape. In order to do so, this briefing first gives an overview of the central dynamics of the Congolese political landscape, and then situates the current electoral dynamics within it.

Concretely, this briefing argues how the current electoral dynamics illustrate the key-characteristics of the Congolese political 'marketplace': on the one hand, a strong personalization of the political space, with the President and his inner court behind many of the decisions; and on the other hand, a strong fracturing of the political landscape, with individual actors navigating these paradoxical tendencies for access to positions of power.

Current DRC political landscape

A key-characteristic of the Congolese political system is the **strong personalization of power** and monetized patronage: decision making power in the DRC is heavily concentrated in the hands of the president and in his own "[court](#)". On the one hand, the president controls the political and economic space without much interference from the broad set of institutions that

Kristof Titeca

Institute of Development Policy,
University of Antwerp
kristof.titeca@uantwerpen.be

James Thamani

Analyst based in Kinshasa

Institute of Development Policy
University of Antwerp
iob@uantwerpen.be
+32 3 265 57 70

uantwerp.be/iob

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are meant to check his power. The executive government, the judiciary, the legislature, and the parastatals are totally or partially subservient to him. On the other hand, the president's court - which is composed of a narrow group of [formal and informal](#) advisors, including legal advisors, [military officers](#) and businessmen - wields power that extends beyond their functions, and are often used by the president to circumvent formal structures of governance and control.

While influential, actors within the president's court are [expendable](#) and can be distanced when they pose a threat to the president. As such, many inevitably and at times indiscriminately [defend](#) all the president's actions, as their fate is tied to his – this is particularly the case for those without [much independent power](#) base outside of the clout of the president. Meanwhile, as the cake to be shared is small, many [compete against each other](#) for supremacy within the president's court.

Everyone in this political system is vying for political office and tries to pull themselves as close as possible to the centers of power. In the process they form opportunistic alliances, make deals, plot the downfall of rivals, and importantly latch onto those who they believe will move them up to the centers of power. For example, some show total allegiance to the president and his goals, while others seek “godfathers” who may serve as conduits to the president. These include, for example, his family and relatives, his presidential advisors, and a host of informal advisors who operates behind the façade of established institutions.

Most importantly, as the political landscape is monetized, officeholders ensure their survival by giving the president and other relevant actors a cut in all lucrative state projects: numerous reports have revealed the extent to which the president, his family, and other close collaborators benefit from [lucrative state projects](#), including: the recently concluded [Inga III dam project](#), the [deep-water port](#) off the coast of Muanda, and the construction of a [new international airport](#) in Kinshasa.

Secondly, political crises have been a key instrument for the regime. For example, after [failing](#) to organize elections according to the constitution in December 2016, the ruling majority opened up [negotiations](#) with the opposition. While the official objective was to find a common solution and prevent the [imminent implosion](#) of the country, the outcome was office-sharing: at the end of the negotiation the premiership was handed over to a member of the opposition, Samy Badibanga, a dissident UDPS cadre. He was quickly replaced six months later by another [dissident UDPS cadre Bruno Tshibala](#). Additionally, several opposition figures agreed to enter the government, including many influential ones such as Steve Mbikayi, Jean Lucien Busa, Azarias Ruberwa, José Makila, Justin Bitakwira, and Vital Kamhere.

While the opposition gained a few cabinet posts in the government and other ad hoc [structures](#), this was overall mostly beneficial to the ruling majority. They not only managed to weather the crisis and kept themselves in power for at least two additional years, they also further fractured the opposition: the appointed prime minister Bruno Tshibala was [disavowed](#) by part of the opposition and by his own political party UDPS. This prompted numerous [defections](#) from the opposition and produced a [splinter UDPS party](#). In the end, Tshibala threw his support behind the ruling coalition's presidential

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candidate Emmanuel Shadary, [reportedly](#) in exchange for a position in future institutions.

Central in all of this is regime stability (rather than development or good governance), which is sustained through frequent cabinet reshuffling and negotiations between the ruling majority and the regime: an unstated objective of these negotiations is the dispensing of state offices to various members of the opposition, in order to ‘bring them on board’. Indeed, as these negotiations have become frequent, political elites often utilize their status as opposition members or majority – sometimes oscillating between the two camps – more as a currency to bargain for a place into new governments or other lucrative positions. As such, it is not uncommon for former sworn critiques and opponents of the ruling majority to turn into equally fervent supporters of the regime as they are offered a cabinet office. Likewise, it is also not uncommon for a former member of the ruling majority to go against the majority when they are no longer in power.

While such governments are often branded “[unity government](#)” or “[coalition governments](#)”, **their common features are their internal fragmentation and lack of real authority**, especially on matters of strategic importance. Such internal fragmentation renders governance a matter of constant balancing of various private interests, rather than a common vision. Internal fragmentation is manifested at two levels – horizontal and vertical.

On the one hand, there is **horizontal fragmentation** between and among elites in various executive governments as well as various political alliances (e.g. political parties or electoral pacts). For example, most agree to join executive governments on the basis of individualistic objectives and interests instead of common goals and ideologies. Likewise, political parties are often seen as waiting rooms for future appointments. As a result, getting important policy accepted require aligning individual interests of all of these actors: important decisions can be slowed down or sped up depending on whether those who stand to benefit can benefit. For example, while the law on the territorial [decentralization](#) had been in the pipeline since 2006, it was only put in motion in 2016, mainly as a means to [weaken](#) former governor Moïse Katumbi, who had defected from the majority in 2017.

On the other hand, there is **vertical fragmentation** and disconnect between elites at the top and in governments and the aspiration of the wider society. A [report](#) by the Congo Research Group (CRG) for example revealed that most Congolese have increasingly less confidence in the government and other institutions of the country; and highlights a damaged social contract between state and society in the country.

So what does all this mean for the current electoral dynamics?

2018 election: FCC appropriates political trends

One key goal of the current ruling majority has been to keep power as long as they can in order to benefit from the state purse as much as they can. The FCC can be seen as a vehicle to accomplish these particularistic goals, and its functioning reflects the dynamics discussed above.

Firstly, **personalization of power in the hands of the president** is demonstrated by how the selection of the flag bearer of the FCC was conducted: Kabila [tightly controlled](#) and directed the entire process in order to choose a candidate completely dependent on him and who would advance his goals. There was no shortage of potential candidates within the ruling majority who were eying to become successors to Kabila. They maintained a semblance of support as long as there was still a chance that they would be selected, but decided to distance themselves when they were not picked or when their objectives were not met.

Months before Shadary's name was announced, prospective candidates within the ruling majority engaged in [quiet battles](#) against each other. The examples of current state minister for planning Bahati Lukwebo and former prime minister Matata Ponyo are illustrative of these. Bahati is the president of the Alliance des Forces Démocratique du Congo (AFDC), the second largest party within the ruling coalition, and had been considered as a potential dauphin due to his [independent financial and political power base](#). However, his ambitions [were not appreciated in the inner circles](#) of the president. He had long been dissatisfied with the limited number of ministerial portfolios his party had been given in successive governments,

which did not reflect his political weight. As such, it was [reported](#) that Kabila's chief of staff Nehemie Mwilanya had sought to create discords within the AFDC in order to weaken his presidential ambitions. Similarly, former prime minister Matata Ponyo, who was also considered as a potential successor to the president, engaged in a leadership [battle](#) with Aubin Minaku, the current speaker of the parliament and yet another potential successor. As secretary general of the presidential majority (MP), Aubin Minaku failed to get an MP candidate elected as governor in Maniema, [reportedly](#) because Matata threw his support behind the independent candidate in order to assert his power within his turf.

Shadary's unexpected designation uncovered the internal fragmentations: many [publicly voiced their dissatisfaction](#), while some [ethno-regional associations](#), with a vested interest in having their "own" as president, also rejected Shadary's designation.

Secondly, the most important structures of the recently formed [campaign team](#) of the FCC are composed of the president's closest collaborators: the finance team, for example, is headed by Moise Ekanga and none other than the president's sister Jaynet Kabila. Moise Ekanga, while not occupying a formal position in the government, has been linked to numerous lucrative state's deals, such as the [2008 Sino-Congo cooperation](#) agreement and the recent [deep-water port in Banana](#). Jaynet Kabila is a direct/indirect beneficiary of several deals as documented in [numerous reports](#). Other members include Emmanuel Adrupiako, one of Kabila's "[informal treasurers](#)" who is alleged to have benefited from several [lucrative deals](#); [Albert Yuma](#), Kabila's closest business collaborator; and several ministers of key sectors such as Finance, Mining, Hydrocarbons and Budget.

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Thirdly, while the FCC has been presented as homogenous and cohesive, **the coalition resembles a patchwork of disparate political parties and political elites**. It has managed to incorporate a wide range of politicians who not so long ago were sworn opponent of the ruling majority but have now turned into fervent supporters. Most (if not all) are motivated by calculations of future benefits and guarantees of future political appointments. For example, the selection of Emmanuel Shadary was not a unanimous decision, and many of the within the ruling majority were quick to voice their disapproval: in an unprecedented move, Tryphon Kin-Key, a former senior minister who founded the “Kabila désir” (Kabila wishes) political party, not only criticized the designation of Shadary, arguing that Kabila had been [tricked](#), but also recently [sided](#) with Etienne Tshisekedi and Vital Kamehre’s electoral pact.

Fourthly, the FCC has had unfettered use of state assets and bodies, a practice that has been denounced by the opposition as well as some civil society organizations. For example, it was reported that the official presentation of Shadary before a large crowd of supporters in Kinshasa’s stadium Tata Raphael [benefited from state assets](#): many key officials were chauffeured to the events in [government-issued](#) vehicles and were under heavy police protection.

Lastly, these dynamics do not only manifest themselves within the majority, but also within the opposition. The outcome of the 2016 power sharing arrangements deeply fractured the opposition. Furthermore, the recent alliance that resulted with the designation of Martin Fayulu failed mainly because of a lack of consensus on the sharing of political positions.

In conclusion, and as we have mentioned at the start of this briefing, the current electoral dynamics illustrate the key-characteristics of the Congolese political ‘marketplace’ (De Waal 2016): on the one hand, a strong personalization of the political space, with the President and his inner court behind many of the decisions; and on the other hand, a strong fracturing of the political landscape, with individual actors navigating these paradoxical tendencies for access to positions of power.

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