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[Why Congo's chaotic election matters \(economist.com\)](https://www.economist.com)

Land of confusion

Why Congo's chaotic election matters

The country is a vortex of instability at the heart of Africa



image: ap

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One of the world's least orderly elections will be held on December 20th. Or will it? A presidential ballot is scheduled in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a mineral-rich but breathtakingly poor country of 100m people. However, the preparations have been [so shambolic](#) that some locals expect a delay, or an extension of voting. Many areas will not receive crucial papers for recording the results by election day. By one estimate 70% of voter-identity cards are illegible, raising fears that some people will be barred from voting, while others will vote twice. And those are just some of the problems in the parts of the Congo that are not at war.

Fighting has forced 7m Congolese people to flee from their villages, including 450,000 in the six weeks to the end of November. A confusion of conflicts makes life in much of the east of the country unbearable—some of the militias there loot rapaciously and seek to subjugate local populations through mass rape. No other country, [bar Sudan](#), endures displacement on such a scale.

One of the strongest militias, the m23, is backed by Rwanda, though Rwanda denies it. Tensions between the two countries are frighteningly high. Some observers fear open war may break out; Avril Haines, the White House intelligence chief, has been bending ears in both countries' capitals to avert such a calamity, and seems to have brokered a temporary ceasefire in their proxy war. On the campaign trail, Congolese politicians denounce their neighbour in incendiary terms. Around the time Britain's Parliament was declaring Rwanda to be safe for asylum-seekers, Congo's president, Félix Tshisekedi, was telling a cheering crowd near the border that his Rwandan counterpart, Paul Kagame, was acting "like Hitler" and would end up like him.

Against this backdrop, the odds of a free and fair ballot are not good. The last time Congo voted, [in 2018](#), an independent tally recorded a thumping victory for Martin Fayulu, a candidate who promised to curb corruption. But the electoral authorities announced wildly different numbers and handed the presidency to Mr Tshisekedi. Many Congolese suspect a stitch-up, whereby the outgoing regime of Joseph Kabila handed power to Mr Tshisekedi in return for a promise not to touch Mr Kabila's economic interests. (Both men deny it.) America turned a blind eye for fear that if it did not, Congo might turn to China for support. It is a threat Congolese politicians use often and shrewdly.

Five years on, Mr Tshisekedi wants a second term. He has done little to deserve it, even if one overlooks the way he took power in the first place. His big reform was to declare education free, which prompted more children to go to school. But some teachers complain that when parents stopped paying them, the state did not

make up the difference. Classrooms are even more overcrowded than they were before, and teachers are often absent. Meanwhile, although the economy has grown robustly, thanks largely to higher prices for Congo's minerals, ordinary Congolese have seen few benefits. Some 60% of them subsist on less than \$2.15 a day. Food-price inflation is an agonising 173%. And corruption appears to have grown even worse, if the grumbles of local businessfolk are true.



image: the economist

The 26 candidates include Moïse Katumbi, a respected entrepreneur-turned-governor, and Denis Mukwege, a doctor who won the Nobel Peace prize for treating war-rape survivors. Against this divided opposition, Mr Tshisekedi, who hints without evidence that Mr Katumbi is really “Rwanda’s candidate”, needs to secure only a plurality of votes. Given the advantages of incumbency—Mr Tshisekedi’s posters are everywhere, his rivals’ are practically invisible—he could perhaps win without cheating. (Polls are unreliable.) If he loses, however, many fear the count will be rigged. A European Union observer mission was forced to withdraw almost completely when the government did not give it permission to bring essential equipment into the country.

For all its dysfunction, Congo matters. It has 70% of the world’s production of cobalt, a mineral essential for the green transition. It is so big and so central that its problems cannot be contained: a civil war from 1998 to 2003 sucked in eight other African countries and cost between 1m and 5m lives, depending on which highly speculative estimate you believe. If the country were ever to stop fighting and start developing, it could be a fulcrum for trade and a huge source of hydroelectric power for the continent. So the question of whether Congolese people can freely choose their rulers has consequences.

Their will could still, conceivably, be respected. Congolese NGOs will try to spot and report rigging, as will some of the remaining international observers. But if the vote turns out to be a sham again, outsiders should say so, including other African governments and the West. If America wants to be taken seriously as a champion of democracy, it should not endorse electoral theft. ■