



View Point

Ballot Politics in DRC: Purposeful Perceptions

*Dr. Sandipani Dash**

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Africa's second and world's twelfth largest country covering an area of around 2.34 million square kilometers in the centre of the continent, held its second presidential-legislative elections on 28 November 2011. The elections are significant from the perspective that the country has come out of the five-year 'Africa's first world war' from 1998-2003 during which more than 4 million lives were lost. The first election was held in 2006 under the supervision of the United Nations (UN). Nevertheless, the recent election derives its salience from the fact that this is the first locally organized poll by DRC after returning to 'partial peace'.

The incumbent, President Joseph Kabila belongs to the People's Party for Reconstruction and Democracy (PPRD) which secured 49 percent of the votes against 32 per cent going to the opponent Etienne Tshisekedi of the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS). The opposition party has questioned the authenticity of the poll results and alleged gross electoral malpractices committed by the ruling regime. President Kabila has admitted that there had been mistakes in the electoral process, but observed that no poll was 100 percent perfect and rejected concerns that the results lacked credibility.

DRC's Supreme Court upheld President Kabila's victory and the African Union (AU) ratified the elections as a success. On the contrary, the United States

(US)-based Carter Center, which sent observers to the election, noted that election process was flawed. The US State Department called for a review of irregularities and the European Union (EU) described parts of the election process as ‘chaotic’.

Ironically, Kinshasa, DRC’s capital, has seen parallel swearing-in ceremonies by both the claimants. There has been reportage of violence and forcible dispersion of opposition supporters by the government troops from Tshisekedi’s oath venue. The post-poll polarization and attendant volatility tend to further destabilize the fragile political edifice of this conflict ridden country.

What remains greater source of concern is the *volte face* of the West concerning Joseph Kabila’s commitment towards democracy. Towards the end of the devastating five year war, the Western powers and their donor agencies were favourable towards Kabila; they even antagonized many within Congolese opposition parties by recognizing Kabila’s administration, despite his lack of a democratic mandate, since he had outright accepted the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank proposals for economic reforms.

Joseph Kabila, however, does not support the Bretton Woods institutions any longer. He has noted that his country met all the conditions given by the two institutions, yet he has been let down and stated, “These institutions should look at the practical lives of the people on the ground before they formulate their conditions if they are to help the DRC or Africa.”

Instead, Joseph Kabila wants a stronger relationship with the Southern African Development Community (SADC), of which he is the Chairman, and the AU. He says the two entities should open up trade among the members even further to unlock the economic potential of their respective countries and improve diplomatic relations. The regional integration has infact gained momentum in Africa, encouraging member countries to try and maximize economic benefits out of this process.

DRC is rich in natural resources. It has an estimated US\$ 24 trillion worth of untapped deposits of raw mineral ores, including the world’s largest reserves of Cobalt and significant quantities of diamonds, gold and copper. In addition, the

country has 70 percent of the world's Coltan, an essential commodity for electronic goods. In his swearing-in speech, Joseph Kabila promised, *inter alia*, to revise the mining code, a declaration which has not gone down well in the West. Trying to qualify the terms of foreign investments into Congolese mining industry, he earlier mentioned that investors must be prepared to work under mutually beneficial conditions and be respectful to the people. He wanted them not only to export raw materials but to build factories and make their products in the country.

In an attempt to extend the efforts of value addition and forging symmetrical production linkage towards the next logical plane, Joseph Kabila speaks about diversification of the country's resource partnership. In this context, he noted, "China is a great example of a win-win situation," by justifying that a country he appreciates for treating him and his country with respect. The West's ongoing criticism of Kabila's electoral mandate is consequently propelled more by its apprehension to lose out the Congolese resource basket to China rather than its genuine commitment for democracy.

Joseph Kabila's strategy of diversifying economic partnerships does not confine itself to China. As Chairman of the SADC, he showed solidarity by participating in the First India Africa Forum Summit in 2008 which is a milestone in India-Africa economic engagement. The contemporary partnership between India and DRC is based on training and capacity building, infrastructure development, trade and investment linkages, information revolution, resource security, peace building, and institutional and policy reforms in global trade and governance. Since India accepts 'African solutions to African problems' as its approach for the politico-strategic engagement in the continent, there is every reason for New Delhi to publicly endorse AU's position on the current political development in Kinshasa.

**Dr Sandipani Dash, Research Fellow at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi 110001*

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