Dynamics of Local Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Challenges Ahead for President Félix Tshisekedi Tshilombo

Alex Ntung

ABSTRACT

Early in January 2019, Félix Tshisekedi took over from Joseph Kabila as President of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Beyond the ongoing contentious discussion about the legitimacy of Tshisekedi's presidency after the irregularities surrounding his election, and the recent agreement to hold talks on potential joint leadership with Kabila, this paper aims to reflect on the less debated and highly complex issues facing the country—the local conflict dynamics and their impact on national, regional, and international affairs. Local disputes have a direct relationship with and a demonstrable impact upon national politics. In most cases, these disputes tend to spill over national

Alex Ntung *is a PhD researcher at the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent, UK. He is investigating the interplay between religious beliefs (the African Traditional Religions, modern Africanized forms of Christianity, and other supernatural beliefs) and modern politics in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and examining their significance, influence, and place in modern peace processes. Alex is also the author of* Not My Worst Day, *a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, a professional member of the UK Expert Witness Institute, and a DRC political and security analyst. Alex has been involved in political mediation for civil society organizations in conflict-affected areas, for which provides insights into issues of war, security, and cultural insensitivity in conflict resolution. Alex was born into a family of cattle herders, semi-nomadic, pastoralist people in South Kivu in the DRC. Growing up, he survived extreme violence on a terrifying scale as he lost many members of his family.*

borders, and groups perpetuating violence have become instrumental actors in regional security clashes.[1] However, the dynamics of local conflict have long been either trivialized or misinterpreted. Attempts to understand the complexity of this context, a prerequisite to securing a sustainable peace arrangement, have been rare. The analysis in this paper focuses on eastern Congo, where national and non-state actors have historically manipulated ethnicity, land rights, and local governance according to damaging and divergent political and economic agendas that do not benefit the local population. Without peace in the DRC, security in the Great Lakes region will remain fragile. This peace depends significantly on stability in eastern Congo. In this context, this paper highlights some of the greatest national and regional security challenges to Tshisekedi's leadership over the next five years.

INTRODUCTION

In his inauguration speech in January 2019, President Félix Tshisekedi declared his commitment to fighting corruption, returning the rule of law, and ending the fighting by various armed groups in the East. His aim to "build a strong Congo, turned toward its development in peace and security—a Congo for all, in which everyone has a place," was an ambitious promise that may seem an unrealistic platitude to the Congolese public.[2] The delivery of these ambitious plans will most likely be hampered given that the DRC is mired in one of the world's deadliest conflicts.[3] This paper provides an analysis of the most complex challenges facing the Tshisekedi's government: local conflict dynamics and deep-rooted political, security, and economic activities of the armed opposition groups and political elites in the country's eastern region.

In the eastern region, there have been recent recurrences of violence caused by diverse networks of militias and rebel groups. These groups continue to commit odious crimes encompassing the looting of natural resources, using sexual violence as a weapon of war, conducting selective massacres, and inflicting inhumane treatment on rural inhabitants of the territory they seek to control. This resulted in forced mass displacement, with 4.5 million people becoming internally displaced in 2017 according to the UN.[4] Between January and November 2018 alone, nearly 150.000 Congolese fled to the neighboring countries such as Uganda, Burundi, and Zambia.[5] Such instability continues to have complex regional security and economic impacts.

The conflicts have also been the focus of attention for the world's largest and most expensive UN peacekeeping intervention, MONUSCO.[6]

However, the UN mission has failed to end violence, to restore security, or to build peace. The current situation continues to be volatile, so much so that in 2018, continued violence caused severe setbacks to responses to an outbreak of Ebola in the North Kivu area, where similar outbreaks had previously been successfully managed.[7] Meanwhile, armed opposition groups have become used to an autonomous existence in both North and South Kivu due to several factors: access to lucrative natural resources, absence of state authority, and weakness and complicity of the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC).[8]

The DRC's political and historical background suggests that the aftermath of the controversial December 2018 elections have great potential for impact at national and local levels. This paper does not intend to provide a detailed description of armed opposition groups or to map their networks and zones of operation, which has been done elsewhere.[9] Instead, the discussion will focus on the fundamental drivers of local conflicts and their dynamic relationships with national and regional political elites. Examples will be mainly drawn from the case of the High Plateau of Itombwe in the territories of Fizi and Mwenga (South Kivu), the areas bordering Uganda (North Kivu), and along the Rusizi River in the territory of Uvira in eastern Congo. Since the late 1990s, the DRC's political and diplomatic relations with its neighbors Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi have often been shaped by the eastern cross-border security context. This paper examines new foreign rebel groups with important links to neighboring governments who present the greatest risks. Fundamentally, stability in Africa's Great Lakes region depends on peace in the DRC, and continued instability in the eastern region will undermine any efforts for lasting peace in the DRC. The paper concludes by recommending several strategies with the potential to end local conflicts.

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A BRIEF POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

With its central location in the heart of Africa, its vast territory—equal to the whole of Western Europe—and its abundance of mineral wealth, the DRC has always been of global security and economic interest. The country has consistently endured political and social turmoil, starting

with the Katanga secessionist war in 1960 that quickly dampened the popular euphoria prompted by the handover of power from Belgium to Congolese authorities. The country was plunged into a series of conflicts that later became characterized externally as the "Congo Crisis."[10] In the midst of this upheaval came the assassination of the first DRC Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, and the following "Mulele" or "Simba rebellion."[11] The DRC exhibited its own variation of the communist versus capitalist confrontation that defined the Cold War across the former European colonial territories in sub-Saharan Africa. This turmoil eventually led to the establishment of the Western-supported authoritarian regime of President Mobutu Sese Seko in 1965, who renamed the country Zaire.

Throughout this violence, ethnicity became reinforced as a prominent political identification. Conflicts in eastern DRC—then Zaire—mostly in North and South Kivu, served to translate a nationalism-based revolution from the local to the national level. Combatants, civil society, and political elites began to operationalize ethnicity as a political identity, leading to the exclusion and marginalization of others. As a result, during and after the 1964–1965 Mulelist (Simba) civil war, tensions between the Congolese Tutsi ethnic group (the Banyamulenge) and their neighbors—the Bafulero, Bavira, and Babembe groups—became violent. Towards the end of the 1990s, a similar series of deadly violent episodes erupted between the Rwandaphone communities and their neighbors—the Hunde and Nande—in North Kivu.

Mobutu's leadership finally collapsed in 1997 after a military intervention led by then-rebel leader Laurent-Désiré Kabila with the support of Ugandan and Rwandan forces. As a result, not only did local resolution mechanisms disappear, but new actors also started dominating the scene—namely a coalition of Congolese rebel movements, supported by Uganda and Rwanda, mainly from the eastern part of the country.[12] This crisis eventually deepened to involve over six African nations and more than a dozen rebel groups, leading to its characterization as Africa's World War. Between 1998 and 2004, nearly four million people died as result of preventable diseases and war-related humanitarian issues.[13] In early 2000, leaders of various parties to the conflict were brought together for peace and political negotiations in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue. A Global and Inclusive Agreement on Transition was reached in December 2002 and adopted in Sun City, South Africa. While this was a major achievement towards building peace, conflicts in the East have not ended.

The eastern region has been consistently viewed as a starting point for DRC political crises, as seen in the 1960s Moba war; in Che Guevara's

and his Cuban fighters' involvement; in Laurent Kabila's emergence as a revolutionary leader of the Hewa Bora guerilla base in the 1996 Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL) and Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD), which was supported by Rwanda; and the Movement for the liberation of the Congo (MLC), which was backed up by the Ugandan army in northeastern Congo. At present, the region has become a network of coalitions, witnessing violent confrontations between hundreds of militia groups. These civil wars in eastern Congo have been characterized as tribes killing each other. However, not only is this a gross misinterpretation, but it also neglects to fully understand the situation as a serious threat to global security.

Impact of Tshisekedi's Controversial Presidency

Since the AFDL crises and Africa's World War, Laurent-Désiré Kabila and his son, Joseph Kabila, have served as president, with Joseph staying on beyond his mandate. State-building, the democratization agenda, the succession of power, and Joseph Kabila's attempts to extend his presidency beyond the constitutionally legal term limit have been the main concerns of international efforts to build peace in the DRC. Early in 2018, there was fear of political violence following predictions that Kabila would run for a third term, and there was anxiety over whether there would be a peaceful transfer of power when the long-delayed elections were finally held. Unexpectedly, in August 2018, Kabila announced that he would step down and identified, Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary, former Minister of the Interior and a relatively unknown figure as his preferred successor. For many observers, as well as for the political opposition, Shadary was considered a stand-in for Kabila until he was able to orchestrate another political comeback. Surprisingly, this plan did not succeed, as Shadary was defeated handily during the elections at the end of December 2018. Instead, the Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante (CENI) declared as winner Tshisekedi—the son of a former presidential candidate, Etienne Tshisekedi.

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While Kabila failed to extend his term in power, he has nevertheless managed to influence the elections. The current situation supports

the argument that a focus on presidential elections as a nation-building strategy diverts from the priorities most likely to lead to sustainable peace.[14] Leadership succession is important, but presidential elections are just one of many aspects of building a stable democratization process. Security and pacification of the country should be prioritized, as the armed groups in the East are unlikely to lay down arms as a result of elections alone.

The DRC has experienced three presidential elections so far, but none have been entirely free and fair and their results have always been contested. Election participation has continued to decline, as potential voters perceive elections as disconnected from local issues. It is generally acknowledged that the recent presidential succession has created a precedent for peaceful handovers of power in Congo. However, Congolese voters, historically wounded and with high expectations of Tshisekedi's promises, care not about the outcome of presidential elections but about whether the person in power can bring change, peace, and stability at the local level. A failure to meet these needs might lead the people to reject Tshisekedi and local groups to conduct further armed activism, which leverages this sentiment of disenfranchisement and intensifies regional and ethnic conflicts.

Regionalism's rise occurs in a fragile national political context. In the DRC, tribalism and regionalism play an important role in building a political power base, especially during elections.[15] This is often reflected in the strategic leadership of the government, FARDC, and other security institutions. Kabila's regime had been politically and militarily dominated by elites primarily from the northern provinces of Katanga. His regime was effectively challenged by an opposition that trained its rhetoric on criticizing pro-Kabila individuals and groups as "no son of the soil," "outsiders," "invaders," "strangers," and "*pas les congolais de souche*" (those perceived as non-indigenous natives).[16] The collapse of Mobutu's power in the late 1990s was seen as a fall of the Ngbandi tribe, which had long been dominant in political and military terms. With Mobutu also declined the influence of people from the North and South Ubangi provinces and Mongala provinces in general. If Tshisekedi cannot provide positive change, his contested election could generate even more intense tribalism and regional antagonism, which would in turn lead to other forms of local conflict.

ETHNIC IDENTITY AND INDIGENOUS POLITICS

There is a strong relationship, on the one hand, between power, citizenship, political rights, and local people's claims to land ownership. On the other hand, economic, social, and identity factors are connected with the

roots of conflict. Political representation in eastern Congo relates to ethnicities and territories, controversial citizenship rights, and land tenure—all of which form part of the local dynamics that influence peace and security.

Identity

Building a positive and shared national identity has not been a policy priority for the DRC government. Rather, it seems that what is shared among the Congolese people is the tragic experience of suffering through successive, brutal colonial and post-colonial authoritarian regimes. While they are dynamic, many of the conflicts in the eastern Congo relate to deeply rooted historical practices of marginalization of some groups as the other or as immigrants, based on rights to ethnic political identity asserted by the dominant and aggressive rebel groups. These conflicts also reflect an ongoing refusal to acknowledge ethnic diversity founded on the manipulation of history, ethnic identity, land, and traditional local governance. Such an identity crisis tends to affect mainly communities with shared language, culture, and political, religious, economic, and social structures. For example, the political and ethnic identities of the Congolese Tutsis people specifically, and Rwandaphone (Hutu ethnicity) groups generally, in both North and South Kivu have often been contested and confused due to regional transborder cultural and linguistic links. Since the 1990s, Tutsis in the territories of Rutchuru, Walikale, Kalehe, and Masisi—making up North Kivu—and Fizi, Mwenga, and Uvira—making up South Kivu—have been attacked by armed groups who often loot or destroy their livestock and force them to flee to neighboring countries, such as Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda.

Citizenship

Similarly, citizenship rights have become a contentious issue over the past four decades. These problems have roots in the Belgian colonial administration, for whom local political structures were of great interest in ensuring efficient territorial control over the region. The colonial authority introduced social antagonism as part of territorial and political restructuring of various regions through the lenses of "homogeneous ethnic groups."[17] This practice runs against local practices of collective exploitation of lands and fails to consider the DRC's 700 different languages and dialects and varied ethnicities and cultural groups,[18] which straddle borders with nine other neighboring countries.[19]

Two conflicting types of citizenships were eventually adopted and

have inevitably led to clashes: native or customary citizenship and civic or ordinary citizenship.[20] Some ethnic groups were offered customary rights based on their indigenous status while others were denied such rights. Through the lens of trans-border cultural identity and physical features, the above policy resulted in the Tutsis becoming racialized as migrants.[21] The tribes of Bafuliru, Bavira, and Babembe of South Kivu and the Nande and Hunde of North Kivu constructed an ideology of conflict related to land rights through rights to customary power. Banyamulenge were considered under the authority of Mwami (the king) of the Fulero or Babembe traditional authority. These concepts and their application led to the denial of native citizenship for Congolese Tutsis, thereby denying them ethnic rights.[22] The ethnicities that constitute the historical dimension of this contest have very often played out through conflict ranging from verbal controversy to violent struggles between locals. The politics of exclusion has become one of the main drivers for the mobilization of armed groups.

National elites often exploit rhetoric that polarizes the concepts of being Congolese or being indigenous. The term "Rwandan" has become a synonym for "non-indigenous," "settler," and "invader."[23] In the course of election campaigns, political candidates tend to compete with each other to express the most hostile, anti-Rwandan views—a position that played well during the 2006 and 2011 Congolese elections. One of the reasons for former president Laurent-Désiré Kabila's popularity was his xenophobic rhetoric and dehumanizing speeches. His son, Joseph Kabila, failed to address these issues during his presidency. As a result, people of Rwandan and Burundian linguistic cultures in the DRC, especially those of Tutsi ethnicity, are still labelled as outsiders. Nationally, the politics of foreignness have become instruments in promoting regionalization—for example, in Kinshasa, political leaders from the East and their communities are often referred to as non-Congolese nationals or Rwandans.

Land

Access to land is at the core of local conflict in the northeastern Ituri region and in South and North Kivu and is increasingly identified as a root cause of violence, especially in eastern Congo. Access to land provides a resource for livestock and agriculture, and therefore economic power, and local land policies often seem to be based on ethnic and political identity.

The national law regarding land—the Bakajika Law of 1966 and 1973—gave the state the right to own all land and to end the link between land and chiefdoms, or local customary authorities.[24] A presidential decree

could regulate customary local authority and land ownership rights, but such a decree has not been promulgated. The national law is sometimes applied to facilitate economic investors' operations and increasingly imposes local, customary systems of land rights. In many cases, more than one customary system frequently operates in the same space. The law was a form of privatization policy that allowed acquisitions of livestock land concessions to large multinational companies and presented a threat to local agriculturalist ethnic groups.

Such ambiguity has led to a complex and uncertain legal framework that promotes the establishment of a traditional system in which ethnic chiefs regulate land management. Consequently, local legitimacy and social cohesion are affected; certain chiefdoms are contested, lands are informally and illegally distributed, and ethnic groups who are perceived as having no rights are excluded. Conflicts in North Kivu have often been of such a nature, as the chiefdom of the Ruzizi Plain in the territory of Uvira is considered to be the underlying cause of ethnic violence between the "immigrant" Barundi tribe and the "native" Bafuliro.[25] The latter see themselves as having always lived in the area before the colonial era and reject the *chefferie* of the Congolese Barundi. As a result, in April 2012 and March 2019, there were two major assassinations of Barundi tribal chiefs Mwami Floribert Nsabimana Ndabagoye and Murindi Rizinde. Such ethnic tensions resurfaced in 2016 between the Congolese Hutu community—perceived as immigrants—and their Nande "Autochthon" neighbors in the Masisi, and Bwishwa areas.[26] Current conflicts between a coalition of Mai Mai from the local ethnic groups, in the territories of Fizi and Mwenga, and the Banyamulenge have been inspired by similar sentiments.

Localized Violence

Within this context of identity, citizenship, and land issues, the use of violence serves as a means to raise the political and military profiles of some actors. For example, some major armed groups—the National Council for Renewal and Democracy (CNRD), the Nduma Defence of Congo-Renové (NDC-R), and the SNPSC of Amuri Yakutumba—have restructured themselves as political parties and often produce political declarations against the central government. Other paramilitary groups have emerged as well, claiming that the DRC's security authorities have failed to protect their people against various attacks. Based on this justification, they form self-defense mechanisms and purchase arms.

The ideologies behind indigenous claims to resources remain a

significant inspiration for armed opposition groups. At the same time, the inter-ethnic struggle retains a foundation in competition for access to local economic resources. It is important to recognize that these dynamics are constantly in flux. There is a growing interest among some non-state actors to seek national and international recognition, to advance wider political claims, and to move away from the local ethnic identity crisis.

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All of these issues exacerbate tensions and violence between local communities. Strong leadership and political will to address the underlying causes of these problems is absent. President Tshisekedi has the opportunity to develop strategies for legal and educational reform to address the local governance problems rooted in ideologies that produce divisions based on ethnicity and elevate certain ethnic groups above others. The DRC's history classrooms are as good a place as any to begin to address these issues.

INTERPLAY BETWEEN LOCAL CONFLICTS AND NATIONAL POLITICS

When attempting to provide an understanding of the local conflict dynamics in Eastern Congo, some analysts fail to examine the difference between the underlying causes of conflicts and their consequences. For example, ethnic hatred—which results from political crises, mismanagement of land, and local governance problems—is often over-emphasized and presented as a determinant factor in the local and cross-border conflict. Moreover, the disputes are not only about illegal mineral exploitation, invasions by neighboring countries, or sexual violence; these issues tend to be the atrocious outcomes of the conflicts that emerge from ethnic identity, land disputes, poor local governance, and failure of state institutions. Such structural issues have a significant impact on national politics, as is evident in the South and North Kivu regions.

Furthermore, unlike other complex conflicts in the Middle East or South America, while ethnic identity is used as weapon or instrument of conflict, the national insurgency movements in the eastern Congo that are fighting for control are neither ideological nor static. [27] Rather, they incite ethnic hatred for personal, economic, and political interests. These groups do not mobilize around a rational idea or social policy reform plans. Group members are instead motivated by personal enrichment, as demonstrated

by their looting, hijacking, and racketeering—all hallmarks of Congolese rebellions.[28] Non-state actors also use violence to foster strategies of political control that enables their exploitation of economic resources. While locally rooted, these conflicts also stem from Congolese elites' competition for political power by remotely directing operations and exploiting local conflict.[29]

These types of activities are prevalent in the Kivu regions. Indeed, North and South Kivu are characterized by recurring insurgencies associated with their history of settlement and citizenship, with the Ituri, Beni, and Maniema provinces all sharing similar types of political violence and local conflict. [30] Within these provinces, extreme poverty and an absence of social services and economic infrastructure have enabled inter-ethnic extremism and political conflict, which have important economic and social repercussions.

Most of the Congolese population lives in rural areas where there is an absence of state authority. There are few alternatives available to economically deprived individuals in deciding between rebel leaders and government forces, which have both committed various human rights abuses. Many communities with weak public representation see armed groups as a means to communicate their grievances to the state or as opportunities to belong to a social identity group.

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The Mai Mai insurgency provides a prime example of an actor that has exploited these dynamics, illustrating the politicization, complicity, and manipulation of local conflicts by political elites.[31] This network of insurgents operates in eastern Congo in association with various other armed groups to contest various local grievances. The level of local support for Mai Mai rebels varies from one community to another, but each cell tends to have the support of local facilitators or national political elites. Recently, to seek legitimacy and tribal solidarity, the Mai Mai have advanced political claims for national recognition and have sought to establish local power through violence. Since 1996, the Mai Mai network has been expanding in North Kivu, South Kivu, Maniema, and various parts of the Katanga province. Mai Mai groups are neither cohesive nor homogeneous, but they share characteristics across important social dimensions. The diversification of local economic control has divided the Mai Mai movement into different factions—either wider or narrower in scope than the *localité* (local

administration). They sometimes work across different ethnic groups, which perceive themselves to be homogeneous. These factions are multifaceted and have established alliances with regional groups according to shifting political circumstances and perceived economic threats. While its various groups fight against internal government armed forces, the Mai Mai have evolved into an abstract concept that now refers broadly to combatants who mobilize around the idea of protecting their local territories against invasion by those perceived as foreigners.[32]

The Mai Mai have offered an "adhesion ideology" for those considering themselves outsiders to national politics. Rebellion, which exploits the state's fragility, is used as a means to access a political audience and an instrument of economic rivalry between various political and military networks at local, provincial, and national levels. Members of these groups tend to detach themselves from their local communities and create links to political and economic elites. Still, the rebels mobilize support from local people and legitimize their causes based on local grievances, such as land rights or local governance. Some rural territories have come under the control of warlords who, in the absence of state authority, collect taxes, claim various government functions, and use violence as a political strategy. In other areas, armed militias simply exploit local people as means of financing or mobilizing resources to sustain their activities against the FARDC.

The Mai Mai demonstrate how local conflicts interact with broader rebel movements and how rebel groups and national political elites exploit existing conflict dynamics to gain political influence.

Since its inception, the Mai Mai ideology has proved flexible to various political contexts. Thus, the Mai Mai phenomenon should not be dismissed as foolish or unfounded. It should instead be recognized as a process that mobilizes local economic grievances to achieve political power. Armed groups in the DRC are connected to national politics and to the rivalries between local, provincial, and national political and military elites.[33]

As an example of this dynamic, a sub-group of the Mai Mai called Malaika—part of William Amuri Yakutumba's National Coalition for Congo's Sovereignty (SNPSC)—claims to have been endorsed by the 2018 presidential election candidate Emmanuel Shadary Ramazani.[34] Similarly, in March 2019, a senior national political leader, Justin Bitakwira Bihona-Hayi, was featured in a social media elections campaign for governor of South Kivu.[35] Bitakwira pledged that if elected, "I will order my boys,

including the Mai Mai Rahiya Mutomboki, to stop violence."[36]

The Mai Mai demonstrate how local conflicts interact with broader rebel movements and how rebel groups and national political elites exploit existing conflict dynamics to gain political influence. Well-organized armed groups remain connected both to local populations and unofficial leaders at the national level. If and when Tshisekedi gains full control of the DRC's security institutions, he faces the challenge of eradicating the tradition of political instrumentalization of conflict, which encourages armed groups to exploit land, ethnicity, and governance disputes to advance their political ambitions.

CONFLICTS SPILL OVER THE BORDERS

The DRC has nine neighboring countries and eastern Congo shares borders with Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda. Interaction between Rwanda, Uganda, and the DRC have had a particularly important impact on all countries and the eastern region specifically. The other countries have often been accused of interfering either through military intervention or by supporting rebel groups in the North and South Kivu provinces. Over the last three years, Rwanda's relationship with Uganda and Burundi has deteriorated—a situation which was exploited by Kabila's regime. Over the past two decades, these countries' relationship has been based on security and defense due to the security threat they pose to one another.

Interaction between Rwanda, Uganda, and the DRC have had a particularly important impact on all countries and the eastern region.

Violent political events defined the region's relations in the 1990s—particularly the 1993 assassination of Melchior Ndadaye, the first democratically elected Hutu president in Burundi, and the 1994 Rwandan genocide, during which one million Tutsis were killed and millions of Hutus were displaced in eastern Congo.[37] These events triggered a period of increasing instability in the DRC, which had direct impacts on Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda.

In 1996, Rwanda and Uganda provided support to Laurent-Désiré Kabila through the AFDL to remove President Mobutu from power. Rwanda justified its military intervention as a response to the inability of the DRC authorities to disarm the remnants of Rwanda's Hutu militias, which had been involved in the 1994 genocide and had reorganized as the

Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR). In December 2006, Rwanda was accused of facilitating two major rebellions in North Kivu: the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP) rebellion, led by a Congolese Tutsi, General Laurent Nkunda; and the March 23 Movement (M23) from 2012 to 2013, which was led by General Bosco Ntaganda. A military agreement between presidents Joseph Kabila and Paul Kagame ended the former, whereas the latter was defeated by the South African-led UN Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) in cooperation with the FARDC.

The success of Rwanda's ruling party in strengthening its internal economic and defense capabilities has emboldened the party to extend its influence into regional political and security agendas—presenting a heightened threat to its neighboring countries. Amidst these inter-state tensions, foreign armed groups have emerged as relevant actors. The DRC national government has often manipulated one armed group to address the challenges presented by another. For example, between 1998 and 2003, Kabila's government supported certain Mai Mai armed groups in combatting the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) military invasion during the Second Congo War.[38]

Due to lingering animosity over the last three years, bilateral and multilateral relations have deteriorated—particularly between Rwanda and Burundi, and between Rwanda and Uganda. Relations remain unstable between Rwanda and the DRC and between Uganda and the DRC. Each of these countries harbors or supports dissidents from its neighbors, which exacerbates regional instability. Uganda navigates this dynamic with an eye to its security and diplomatic leverage over the DRC. For example, in February 2019, about seventy dissidents who were also former M23 rebels returned home to the DRC, facilitated by MONUSCO. Particularly in view of this outside pressure, observers hope that the DRC's new leadership will address decades-old grievances and provide a resolution to the violent conflict in both North and South Kivu.

The current security issues between Rwanda and Burundi are intimately related to Rwanda's relationship with Uganda and the DRC. Armed opposition groups from both Burundi and Rwanda have emerged recently in the territories of Uvira and Fizi in South Kivu. In 2015, the political violence in Burundi, which involved mass protests and a failed coup, led military dissidents to start two rebellions: the *Résistance pour un Etat de Droit* (RED-Tabara) and the *Forces Républicaines du Burundi* (FOREBU). There was already an existing armed movement from Burundi operating in South Kivu referred to as the *Forces Nationales de Liberation* (FNL). A

recent UN report also documented an active Rwandan armed opposition group, the Rwanda National Congress (RNC), led by a Rwandan dissident, General Kayumba Nyamwasa, who is based in South Africa.[39] The report suggests that the group has benefited from Burundi's support in recruiting fighters and providing logistics. Rwanda continues to condemn Ugandan authorities for supporting the RNC and FDRL in threatening its security and persecuting Rwandan nationals in Uganda, who are viewed as Rwandan spies. Uganda denies these accusations. These damaged diplomatic relations have amounted to border closures and a war of words between Foreign Ministers. Similarly, Burundi accuses Rwanda of providing support to the RED-Tabara expansion in the DRC. Rwanda denies these allegations. In the DRC, Kabila indicated that he had no desire to challenge Rwanda. Before the 2018 presidential elections, FARDC handed over two senior FDRL rebels, Ignace Nkaka—alias LaForge Fils Bazeye—and Lt. Col. Jean Pierre Nsekanabo, who led the rebel movement's intelligence operations. Yet, at the same time, Kabila's security services collaborated with Burundi to facilitate RNC rebels.

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The relationship between the DRC and Uganda has been influenced by a dangerous Ugandan Islamist armed opposition, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), which maintains its base in the DRC's Beni territory. The ADF has become one of the most active and violent armed groups in the area,[40] and it has established a vast stronghold and recruitment network across the region.[41] The group has launched deadly attacks on FARDC and MONUSCO troops, seizing ammunition and killing civilians in the Beni area.

In 2018, the activities of national and foreign opposition armed groups forced thousands to flee the South Kivu territories of Fizi and Uvira. The national groups operating in this area are a coalition between the Mai Mai groups of General Amuri William Yakutumba, *Mupekanya* (a local ethnic group coalition), and the FDLR. Their common intention is to "wipe out" the Tutsis from the DRC map.[42] These groups recently carried out deadly attacks on Tutsi cattle herders in villages within Lulenge, in the

territory of Fizi and in the town of Uvira. There are suspicions that their improved military capacity was enabled by external support from the FNL and FDRL armed groups.

While extremely complex, these geopolitical dynamics could be addressed by restoring trust-based diplomatic relations between the region's states based on just, pragmatic agreements that recognize mutual interests and opportunities. Peace in eastern Congo would be a significant step towards these goals. As a long-term strategic plan, collaborative approaches involving reflection on a regional security strategy should be organized regularly to promote inter-state cooperation.

Why Have Existing Intervention Mechanisms Failed?

There are several reasons why intervention mechanisms by the government and MONUSCO have failed to improve stability. First, many members of FARDC tend to organize unofficially around local, ethnic, and regional lines. The army lacks the logistics and capacity to organize effectively and has consistently failed in its mandate to protect the local people. The size of the country, together with the many insurgencies, seriously challenges military efforts to maintain security. The DRC government's initiatives to restructure its security institutions have failed, leaving many local populations in a state of extreme poverty and insecurity. National and international peacebuilding efforts have failed to reform the DRC's security institutions, to strengthen the rule of law, and to establish a state authority that furthers the interests of the Congolese population through both top-down and bottom-up approaches to nation-building.

Second, since the 1990s, there has not been an effective mechanism for addressing the impunity of perpetrators of crimes against humanity. Rather, Kabila's government decided to trade justice for peace.[43] The continued employment of former warlords in the DRC's defense and security institutions is the greatest challenge to peacebuilding.

Third, UN troops and the FIB remain incapable of ensuring local security and intervene only where their actions have the potential to improve public relations nationally and internationally. MONUSCO's missions have failed to deliver results due to its top-down strategy that emphasizes democratization.[44] While elections have occurred, MONUSCO has not addressed local issues or developed effective rule of law in place of the dysfunctional, authoritarian governance system. Some argue that the international peacebuilding effort has in fact enabled authoritarianism in the DRC.[45]

Finally, the Global and Inclusive Peace Agreement brought together national armed forces and many rebel groups and militias, including the main coalition of Mai Mai rebels. Key leaders of these groups were granted lucrative senior military and government positions with the hope that they would integrate their troops. However, the effective bribing of the insurgency with the goal of discouraging insurrection has had the opposite effect. It has encouraged the formation of further armed oppositions, supported by political elites, in order to claim a slice of political power-sharing and to secure important senior government roles in peace negotiations.[46] This strategy has not only perpetuated the cycle of insurrectionism, but it has also promoted a culture of impunity through amnesty.

While there is no direct evidence to demonstrate that such a demobilization approach has influenced a cycle of violence since the peace agreement in 2003, there are reports that need to be investigated further. For example, in the territories of Uvira and Fizi in South Kivu, as well as Butembo and Beni in North Kivu, many combatants have gone through a demobilization process, but given that the FARDC could not meet their subsistence requirements, their vulnerability to being co-opted again by rebel conscription has increased. There has also been a failure to include a justice and accountability mechanism, as well as the provision of economic opportunities, in the demobilization and reintegration process of the combatants.

CONCLUSION

The myriad conflicts in the DRC have complex historical roots. They are dynamic and involve a wide range of both state and non-state actors. The mobilization of these non-state actors tends to have unrelated triggers—constantly shifting alliances, converging and diverging interests, and diametrically opposed objectives. While these sound complex, the conflicts are not solely ideological and can be addressed if there is political will to do so.

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The greatest challenge that Tshisekedi faces during his five-year mandate is unifying these divisions and ending the violence perpetuated by the armed opposition groups in the east. Without eradicating the prevailing ideologies of ethnic exclusion and the conflicts over local governance, it would be quite impossible to foresee any stability in the east, the DRC as a whole, or in neighboring countries.

Tshisekedi's contested presidency has divided the DRC's political classes, and the various armed groups are still re-evaluating their positions and balancing their options in response. [47]

The inability of the central government to assert control over territorial space constitutes one of the many dimensions of the country's ongoing crisis. Armed groups and their elites have been able to leverage the security and governance vacuum to exploit and intensify historic conflicts. The complex cycles of violence enabled them to position themselves as interlocutors of political power, which is problematic for the transition to peace.

In the past, many African countries provided support to local rival armed groups for the purpose of political and economic control. However, these emerging groups that are fueling insecurity across the borders will remain a challenge if trust between Uganda, the DRC, Rwanda, and Burundi is not restored. Tshisekedi has a golden opportunity to address the issue of foreign armed groups: rebellion is losing its popularity and some old regional dynamics are changing. For example, Rwanda's current development progress increases its interest in trading with a stable DRC instead of sustaining current difficult and violent relations. Uganda's priority is no longer an invasion of the DRC, but rather addressing the potential threats presented by the ADF rebels mobilizing on DRC territory. Burundi's support for the RNC and FDRL could stop if there was a normalization of relations with Rwanda. The demobilization and expulsion of foreign armed groups in the DRC will require fresh and positive relationships based on trust and rational diplomacy between these three nations. As one of many ways to address these social and economic issues, Tshisekedi could provide investment to develop infrastructure that could establish an environment to enable all citizens' rise out of poverty and to facilitate lasting demobilization and rehabilitation program for former combatants. *f*

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