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Challenges to Electoral Democratisation in Africa: Case of the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Abstract

Democratisation in developing countries remains an incomplete and, in many cases, elusive project. The literature on democratisation is vast and there are many different possible understandings of the term and the process. While there are many possible criteria one could employ in examining processes of democratisation, this research paper focuses on its electoral components and on the degree to which these exhibit accountability, transparency and the rule of law.

The paper employs the single case study methodology, the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and qualitative research methods (academic and 'grey' literature review) supplemented by media reports, to gather data on the 2006, 2011 and 2018 presidential elections.

Given its pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial struggles, the DRC also constitutes a 'difficult case': If democratisation is possible in the DRC, it is likely to be possible elsewhere in Africa since few other African countries have been at the centre of so much inter-ethnic violence and warfare.

The paper's findings are twofold. Firstly, considering the anti-democratic environment from which DRC emerged, the 2006, 2011 and 2018 elections all demonstrate signs of progress towards democratisation in terms of greater accountability, transparency, and the rule of law. However, secondly, even though there were progressive improvements based on the three criteria employed and across the three elections analysed, these are judged to fall well short of the minimum required to deliver credible elections. Thus, the rise of multiparty and electoral politics in the DRC has failed to result in the consolidation of meaningful electoral democracy. This paper highlights both the importance of, and difficulty in, achieving democratisation through electoral means in the absence of a wider culture of democratisation within a country. In the absence of a democratic culture fostered through education, strong national institutions, and political leadership, elections merely legitimise the status quo.

Keywords: Congo, DRC, elections, Africa, Democracy, Democratisation, Zaire, Tshisekedi, Kabila.