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Source: *Africa Today*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (Summer 2010), pp. 42-61

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/aft.2010.56.4.42>

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Due to the repression of opposition figures, the lack of power invested in the judiciary, and the targeting of media freedom, the Kabila regimes do not meet the minimal requirements for democracy.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo? Corruption, Patronage, and Competitive Authoritarianism in the DRC

Stephanie A. Matti

By examining the Kabila regime through the lens of the “competitive authoritarian” regime subtype, this article aims to advance our understanding of the process and stability of Congolese democratic reform. By examining democratic contestation that has arisen through the legislature, judiciary, media, and electoral arena, this article argues that the Kabila regime does not meet the minimal requirements for democracy but can more accurately be classified as competitive authoritarian. This article proposes that because democratization in the DRC is based on external, rather than domestic, pressure, particularly the effect of Western foreign aid on corrupt patronage networks, the regime is vulnerable to authoritarian drift. In the final section, this article presents the argument that a decrease in politically conditional aid and an increase in politically unconditional Chinese investment are both likely to push the regime in a more authoritarian direction. Given the size, location, and political influence of the DRC, an analysis of Congolese democratic institutions is essential to our understanding of democratic consolidation in Africa.

Introduction

In 2007 Andre Kasongo Ilunga was appointed Minister for Foreign Trade in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Soon after, it was revealed that Ilunga was a fictitious person. Under Congolese government regulations, a party must propose at least two candidates for any ministerial role. To improve his own chances, the leader of a minor political party, Honorius Kisimba Ngoy, put forward Ilunga as a dummy candidate. This plan backfired when Ilunga was offered the position. The prime minister had in effect bestowed

one of the most senior positions in the administration to a person whom he had never met and did not exist (Africa Research Bulletin 2007c). The appointment of Ilunga indicates that despite the success of free and fair elections in 2006, patronage networks and authoritarian procedures, rather than democratic institutions based on the rule of law, characterize the regime.

So how democratic is the Kabila regime? Have the legislature, judiciary, media, and electoral arena fostered democratic contestation? Are formal democratic institutions the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority? Or has Kabila violated these rules to such an extent that the regime does not meet the minimum standards for modern democracy? This paper seeks to answer these questions and in doing so establish whether the Kabila regime can be classified as democratic, authoritarian, or competitive authoritarian.

The paper begins by establishing the theoretical framework for regime analysis, drawing on the competitive authoritarian regime subtype. Second, by examining democratic contestation within the legislature, judiciary, media, and electoral arena, it will contend that the Kabila regime can in fact be classified as competitive authoritarian. This paper will then unpack the domestic and international pressures behind Congolese democratic reform, arguing that because this process is essentially based on foreign aid feeding into corrupt patronage networks, it is inherently fragile. The final section of this paper will explore the vulnerability of the Kabila regime to authoritarian drift within the conceptual bounds of competitive authoritarianism with reference to a possible decrease in politically conditional foreign aid in conjunction with an increase in politically unconditional Chinese investment.

Postconflict Democratization

During the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a proliferation of states experimenting with democratic rule in what Samuel Huntington (1991) termed the "third wave of democracy." More than a decade later, the most impressive growth has not been of democratic regimes, but of pseudodemocracies, in which elections and democratic institutions mask authoritarian elements.

In democratic discourse there has been a proliferation in labels applied to pseudodemocratic hybrid-regime forms.¹ These include illiberal democracy (Zakaria 1997), electoral democracy (Diamond 1999), semidemocracy (Case 1996), semidictatorship (Brooker 2000), electoral authoritarianism (Schedler 1996), soft authoritarianism (Means 1996), semi-authoritarianism (Olcott and Ottaway 1999), and competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2002). A central tenet of these regime subtypes is that "democratic political institutions, such as multiparty electoral competition, masks [*sic*] the reality of authoritarian domination" (Diamond 2002:24).

The competitive authoritarian concept proposed by Levitsky and Way is a specific form of gray-zone regime, which, unlike many other classifications, is endowed with conceptual precision. Competitive authoritarian regimes are defined as “civilian regimes in which democratic institutions exist and permit meaningful competition for power, but where the political playing field is so heavily tilted in favour of incumbents that the regime cannot be labelled democratic” (Levitsky and Way 2005:20).

Levitsky and Way argue that modern democracies meet the following criteria: the legislature and executive are chosen through free and fair elections; virtually all adults have the right to vote; political rights, including the freedom of the press and freedom to criticize the government without reprisals, are protected; and elected leaders are given real authority to govern. While these criteria may be violated in democratic regimes, these violations are not considered broad or systemic enough to undermine democratic competition. In competitive authoritarian regimes by comparison these criteria are met, but are violated with such regularity and to such a degree that the regime cannot be considered a modern democracy (Levitsky and Way 2002:53).

Levitsky and Way have characterized the functioning of competitive authoritarian regimes as follows:

Although elections are regularly held and are generally free of massive fraud, incumbents routinely abuse state resources, deny the opposition adequate media coverage, harass opposition candidates and their supporters, and in some cases manipulate electoral results. Journalists, opposition politicians, and other government critics may be spied on, threatened, harassed, or arrested. Members of the opposition may be jailed, exiled, or—less frequently—even assaulted or murdered. (2002:53)

In competitive authoritarian regimes, arenas of democratic contestation exist through which the opposition can periodically challenge, weaken, and in some cases overthrow the leadership. The leadership must balance the politically costly repression of opposition with tolerance of oppositional challenges which may result in a loss of power (Levitsky and Way 2002:59). Levitsky and Way identify four arenas of particular importance: the electoral arena, the legislature, the judiciary and the media (2002:54). This paper will now examine how these arenas have fared in postconflict DRC. This will then be used to evaluate the performance of Congolese democracy.

Electoral Arena

On 18 December 2005 the DRC adopted a constitution rooted in political liberalism. The constitution reaffirmed universal suffrage and established

a roadmap for multiparty elections by 2006. The constitution reduced the minimum age of presidential candidates from 35 to 30, to include 33-year-old Kabila (Government of the DRC 2005:5).

Approximately eighteen million people across the country turned out on 30 July 2006 to vote. Of the 500 seats in the National Assembly, Kabila's Party of the People for Reconstruction won 111, the main opposition contender Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombe's Movement for the Liberation of Congo won 64, and Antoine Gizenga's Unified Lumumbist Party won 34; the remainder was split among 67 smaller parties (Weiss 2007:138). The Alliance for Presidential Majority, composed of parties loyal to Kabila and Gizenga, formed a government. The presidential elections were highly competitive with none of the 33 presidential candidates winning an outright victory; Kabila won the second-round runoff on 20 August 2006 with 58 percent of the vote (*Africa Research Bulletin* 2006). Administered by an independent electoral commission established by the transition government, the elections were declared to be free and fair (Diamond 2002:28).

Media

While intense competition throughout the election period was facilitated by a relatively independent media, most media outlets were biased in their depiction of parties and candidates, in a number of cases resorting to personal attacks; of the 119 radio stations, 52 television stations and 179 newspapers operating in the DRC hardly any were neutral, with a majority owned by presidential candidates (International Crisis Group 2006:5). However, as no party or candidate had a monopoly over the media, competition ensued.

While the elections were generally peaceful, the afternoon of the presidential runoff saw an outbreak of violence between Bemba's militia and Kabila's Presidential Guard. The violence was triggered by the broadcast of media reports critical of Kabila by a television station linked to Bemba. These reports attacked Kabila personally and accused him of electoral fraud (International Crisis Group 2006:5). Kabila ordered the closure of the stations. The resultant confrontation left 23 people dead and 43 wounded (Agence France Presse 2006:1).

In power, the Kabila government has applied subtle pressure to curb the constitutionally embedded freedom of expression and freedom of press upon which Congolese media independence is built. In one case the editor of privately owned *Le Moniteur*, Rigobert Kakwala Kash, was sentenced to eleven months in prison after a court found him guilty of libeling, insulting, and spreading false rumors about a provincial governor (*Africa Research Bulletin* 2007a). The Paris-based media watchdog Reporters sans Frontières described the verdict as a deterrent to press freedom (*Africa Research Bulletin* 2007b).

Legislature

In the lead-up to the elections there was a massive proliferation in political parties, with 267 registered parties standing (Weiss 2007:138). Almost all the small parties were established to promote the interests of an individual rather than standing on a platform of collective benefit (*Africa Confidential* 2007a); only the Parti Lumumbiste Unife, based on the radical nationalism of Patrice Lumumba, had something approaching an ideology (*Africa Confidential* 2007a).

Key opposition figures including Bemba have used their position to criticize government policy, particularly its human-rights record. Government repression of these challenges is widespread. In the past this repression has taken the form of intimidation, illegal detention, and, in one widely reported case, murder.² In 2007, Bemba told BBC reporter John James that “without necessarily seeking to eliminate me physically, the authorities are preventing my return” (James 2007).

Judiciary

In the Mobutu period the judiciary functioned at the pleasure of the executive when it functioned at all (Savage 2006:6). This situation has not changed significantly under the current administration. An audit of the judicial system in 2004 found that only 20 percent of the population had access to the formal-justice system (Savage 2006:6). Because of historical neglect, the infrastructure of the judicial system has collapsed with judges and other legal practitioners lacking resources including basic legal texts. Despite these obvious deficiencies, Kabila has routinely failed to show a commitment to rebuilding a strong and independent judicial system. In 2004 the administration devoted a mere 0.6 percent of the total budget to the needs of the judicial system (Borello 2004:25).

The Competitive Authoritarian Republic of the Congo

A casual glance at the electoral period shows that the Kabila government is not purely authoritarian. The presence of competition is evident in the intensive campaigning by political parties and the contested nature of the results: Kabila did not win an outright majority, let alone the 70 percent that Levitsky and Way consider indicative of noncompetitive elections (2002:55). Furthermore, the central role of the media in fostering competition throughout the electoral period is indicative of a relatively independent media. There were no major instances of fraud or voter coercion. That the electoral process fostered such a high level of competition indicates that the elections were more than a democratic façade obscuring an authoritarian reality.

While the elections were widely regarded as free, fair, and open, Kabila used various methods, including the manipulation of state resources, to tip

the electoral balance in his favor. On the day of the presidential runoff, the Presidential Guard was used by Kabila to attack private television channels owned by Bemba. Kabila was clearly willing to use violence to undermine the independence of the press, in an attempt to improve his own position. While Kabila used undemocratic methods to improve his own position, meaningful competition ensued to the extent that it was not inconceivable that Bemba would win.

Elections are important moments in which citizens can exert influence over the ruling elite, yet in democratic systems they must be reinforced by strong democratic institutions, effective opposition, and active citizen participation during the interelection period. This section will now analyze whether the media, legislature, and judiciary continued to foster meaningful opposition in the postelection period. In doing so it will examine how the Kabila regime, the first government after the transition period, has evolved since the election.

A diverse and independent media is well established as a cornerstone of the Congolese political tradition. The media represent a powerful mechanism through which discontent with the regime is expressed; however, the Kabila regime has increasingly worked to infringe upon this arena of democratic contestation. Intimidation and arrest have been used to hinder criticism of the Kabila regime; there have been a number of cases of assault, murder, and threatened rape. Yet unlike the media in authoritarian regimes, the Congolese media remains a powerful mechanism for the expression of dissent. As in competitive authoritarian regimes the media are targeted to such an extent that the regime does not meet the minimal conditions of democracy.

Since Kabila was inaugurated, opposition parties have played a small role in politics. This is because of the direct marginalization of the opposition by the government that reflects the nature of Congolese political parties. Throughout the election period issue-based campaigning was virtually absent. Having missed out on the spoils of office, many of the highly personalized political parties ceased to play an important role in the interelection period. However, some individuals have used their position within the legislature to express their disapproval of government policy. Elements of the opposition have been threatened, assaulted, and murdered. Despite systematic repression, there exists a space in which such views continue to be expressed.

The regime has entrenched the independence of the judiciary in the constitution. Unlike the direct infringement of press freedom, the government works to undermine the independence of the judiciary indirectly through depriving it of adequate funding. While Kabila enjoys ample discretion in the appointment of judges, manipulation of the judiciary is largely unnecessary because of the dearth of power vested in this institution. As a result of the near total lack of funding for the judiciary, it is unlikely to foster meaningful democratic contestation.

The Kabila regime cannot be classified as authoritarian or democratic, but it is a hybrid regime situated in the gray zone between democracy and

authoritarianism. That some arenas, including the legislature, media, and electoral system, continue to foster meaningful opposition to the government shows that democracy is not merely a façade. However, the Kabila regime has worked to restrict this opposition. Because of the repression of opposition figures, the lack of power invested in the judiciary, and the targeting of media freedom, the Kabila regime does not meet the minimal requirements for democracy. The regime clearly fits the conditions of a competitive authoritarian regime: while meaningful competition exists, this is violated to such an extent that the political playing field becomes heavily tilted in favor of the incumbent. This paper will now turn to examine the different domestic and international pressures behind the recent democratization process.

The Congolese Political Tradition

Since 1885 the DRC has experienced extractive colonialism, a short-lived democratic regime under Patrice Lumumba (June–September 1960), thirty-two years of Mobutu's authoritarian kleptocracy (1965–1997), four years of Laurent Kabila's authoritarian rule (1997–2001), and the presidency of Joseph Kabila (2001–present) of which three years constituted the transition period (2003–2006). A brief outline of the Congolese political tradition, with an emphasis on the Mobutu period, will be followed by an exploration of the effect of this tradition on the present regime. In doing so, this section aims to disentangle the historical roots of democracy, authoritarianism, corruption, and patronage in the DRC.

The Political Tradition of Corruption and Patronage

Mobutu had a particularly far-reaching influence on the Congolese political tradition, largely due to the length of his rule and the effect of his regime on the Congolese psyche. Under Mobutu a regime was established in which large volumes of state revenue were siphoned off in order to sustain a complex web of patronage networks rather than being reinvested back into the country (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002:143). This was such that only 10 percent of the official budget was spent on education and health services in 1982; by 1992 this had fallen to zero (Banque du Zaire 1992). The ruling elite became fixated on remaining in power in order to enjoy the benefits associated with Mobutu's entourage (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002:4). In this period, corruption and patronage became established as socially accepted cornerstones of the Congolese political tradition.

From independence until the mid-1980s the regime profited from high levels of export earnings based on the country's abundant resources. The DRC has rich reserves of timber, diamonds, copper, cobalt, gold, uranium, and coltan, including approximately one-tenth of the world's copper and 35 percent of the world's cobalt (Russian Metallurgy and World 2007). In the

postindependence period mining was central to the Congolese economy, accounting for 58 percent of the country's export earnings in 1958 (Martelli 1962:19). However, falling copper prices,³ the increasingly corrupt and inefficient nationalized mining sector (Aust and Jaspers 2006:40), and the expansion of the informal mining sector⁴ led to a significant decrease in state revenue in the late 1980s.

This decrease directly undermined Mobutu's capacity to reward loyalty among his vast network of clients, opening opportunities for unruly strongmen to threaten the authority of the government (Reno 1997:1). By the early 1990s the country was in a state of political collapse. The centrality of patronage to the regime is evident in the collapse of the state following a decrease in the resource revenues upon which this patronage system was dependent.

Despite a change in leadership, corruption and patronage continue to pervade the Congolese political system. Patronage is evident in the overrepresentation of cabinet members loyal to Kabila (*Africa Research Bulletin* 2007b). Furthermore, by replacing the heads of thirty-seven state enterprises with his own "clients," Kabila was able to increase his economic power and political patronage (*Africa Confidential* 2008:8). Complex patronage networks, not party ideology, continue to dictate the allocation of key positions within the administration. As people continue to enter politics in order to access the benefits that accrue to those in power, this cycle continues. This patronage network is entrenched with corruption at all levels of the administration. In 2007 *Transparency International* gave the DRC a score of 1.9 out of 10 according to the Corruption Perception Index, indicating rampant corruption.

High levels of corruption and patronage have undermined the establishment of transparent, democratic institutions. These rent-seeking ruling elite have worked against the formation of strong institutions that may have the capacity to curb this behavior (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002). In addition to the absence of requisite political will, these corrupt practices have further undermined the capacity of institutions by depriving them of necessary state revenue.

The Political Tradition of Democracy

Democracy is not merely a foreign concept in the DRC but has historical roots in Congolese society. The Mouvement National Congolais under the socialist leadership of Patrice Lumumba won democratic elections in May 1960. However, by September of the same year the government had been overturned by a coup d'état, ending the DRC's first experimentation with democracy.

A sustained popular movement has pushed for Congolese democratization since the early 1980s. In 1980, a 52-page letter was drafted by thirteen members of parliament to Mobutu demanding political reform. Over the next decade this group pushed for democracy under the leadership of Etienne Tshisekedi wa Mulumba despite marginalization and persecution by the

government. During a brief release from prison in 1982 the group members formed the political party, the Union pour la Democratie et le Progress Social. Despite violating the law banning political parties, the new party instantly became popular with the masses (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002:185).

In the early 1990s the Mobutu regime turned to democracy in an attempt to retain power in the face of state failure. The regime oversaw the legalization of political parties and launch of the National Sovereign Conference as a forum for inter-Congolese dialogue (Borello 2004:vii). This limited liberalization of the political system further undermined the highly centralized system of patronage. Mobutu quickly aborted the democratization process and managed to remain president for the next four years. A trilateral alliance of Angola, Rwanda, and Uganda invaded the DRC in November 1996 sparking the First Civil War.

While there has been a long-standing democratic movement in the DRC, democratic reform in the postconflict period has failed to incorporate this. The four main belligerents in the Second Civil War were made vice presidents in the power-sharing transitional government; meanwhile, the democratic movement, which was not privy to either civil war, was excluded (BBC World Service 1998:1). In the lead-up to the elections Tshisekedi boycotted the registration of his political party in an attempt to negotiate the late registration of voters. Even when this was ruled out, Tshisekedi continued his position of boycott (*Africa Confidential* 2006:1). As a result the democratic movement has not been included in the postconflict democratic reform process. Despite this, Tshisekedi remains a powerful and immensely popular figure in Congolese politics.

Despite the apparent success of the elections, there is not a lot of popular support for the current regime. The view that the election was a farce arranged to legitimize the internationally backed Kabila is widespread throughout Congolese society, from the highest Roman Catholic Church authorities and Congolese intellectuals to the vast bulk of the Congolese diaspora (Weiss 2007:141). This may be due, in part, to the exclusion of the democratic movement and to the corruption and patronage of, and repression by, the government.

It was only when the state was on the verge of collapse that the Mobutu regime attempted to establish even the most nominal façade of democracy. While there was a strong and popular democratic movement in the DRC, this was marginalized throughout the Mobutu period. This democratic movement has been sidelined in the transition period and electoral process, thereby depriving the Kabila regime of a solid foundation of popular domestic legitimacy.

The political tradition of the Congolese leadership is one of authoritarianism and corrupt patronage networks, not of populism or democratic rule. This section has shown that while the patronage, corruption, and authoritarianism of the present regime have strong connections to the Congolese political tradition, there is minimal linkage between the postconflict democratic reform and the Congolese democratic movement.

Foreign Aid and Democratic Conditionalities

The previous section has shown that the democratic element of Congolese competitive authoritarianism is not based on domestic pressure; this section will examine the role of external factors, particularly politically conditional foreign aid, in the democratic reform process. Accordingly, this section will first present a brief outline of foreign involvement in postconflict DRC before analyzing how this has affected the political persuasion of the regime.

International, particularly Western, actors have provided immense support to postconflict security and economic reconstruction, and the election process. While the United States, the international financial institutions, and private donors have been important, the United Nations and the European Union have had the greatest involvement (Chivvis 2007:25–26). These donors have overseen an influx of high levels of foreign aid since the end of the Second Civil War in 2002. Countries with Official Development Aid (ODA) to GDP ratios in excess of 10 percent are classified as having a high dependence on foreign aid (Loots 2006:366). In the DRC this ratio was 25.7 percent in 2005 with approximately US\$10 billion of foreign assistance in the 2002 to 2006 period (Stearns and Wrong 2006).

Since the 1980s, liberal democratic reform has become an important precondition for mobilizing Western development assistance (Aust and Jaspers 2006:25). In the DRC such conditionalities have been utilized to press for the establishment of representative liberal democracy and capitalist economic structures. The UK alone provided £35.9 million toward the electoral process (Department for International Development 2008:1).

After more than ten years of state collapse the Congolese administration lacked the political and economic capacity to govern the country effectively or finance the necessary reconstruction. Assistance provided by foreign donors has been crucial for conducting democratic elections, building infrastructure, and stabilizing the economy, in addition to financing the activities of the state. With immense international support, these goals have been met with a moderate level of success (International Monetary Fund 2006). Without this support, it is unlikely that the government could ensure the territorial integrity of the country, let alone navigate the complexities of postconflict economic reconstruction.

Economic and security support has been offered on the condition of democratic reform, including the holding of elections. As a consequence the DRC has changed its outward political and economic image by promising market liberalization and democratic reform. As part of this process in 2005 the Kabila administration signed up to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, which promotes transparency and good governance in the extractive industries. Representing a coalition of governments, companies, civil society groups, investors, and international organizations, this initiative provides a framework which the Congolese government can use to increase transparency in the mining sector.⁵

However, Western actors in the DRC have at times emphasized elections at the expense of strong democratic institutions. The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and other transparency initiatives were not emphasized during the transition period for fear that they might derail the electoral process (Kodi 2007). Thus while the Kabila government has signed up to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, it has not been implemented to date (World Bank 2007). Without this pressure, there is little incentive for the ruling elite, who benefit from patronage and corruption, to implement anticorruption measures. International actors have pushed for elections at the expense of structural reform that targets corruption and patrimonialism.

Villalon and Von Doepp argue that democratization can only be established and endure when “the interests and calculations of the key players stimulate them to work within or comply with the system, rather than to subvert it” (2005:16). This seems to be the case in the DRC, where the large sums associated with foreign aid in the DRC provide opportunities for corruption. Meanwhile the plethora of aid projects “provide for the allocation of all sorts of discretionary goods to be politicised and patrimonialised” (Moss, Pettersson, and Wan der Walle 2006:9). Foreign aid represents a large inflow of capital that feeds into and supports the corruption and patronage networks upon which the regime is established. In this way endemic corruption and patronage is part of the reason why the regime has been so willing to accept democratic reform. A pragmatic approach suggests that despite patronage and corruption, or possibly even due to it, foreign aid has provided an incentive for democratic reform. However, democratization on this basis necessitates the continuation of high levels of foreign aid, and it is therefore not an option for sustainable political reform.

Aid conditionalities have promoted democratization in the DRC with varying degrees of success. Postconflict democratization can largely be accounted for by the pressure applied by and incentives attached to foreign aid. However, high levels of foreign aid have undermined the establishment of strong democratic institutions by drawing human resources away from the administration and undermining the establishment of a strong taxation system.

Overseeing the vast number of aid projects operating in the DRC has drawn human resources away from other essential state functions. The salaries available through the public sector do not compete with the salaries and side benefits offered by donor projects; as a result these initiatives draw qualified public officials away from the government sector (Moss, Pettersson, and Wan der Walle 2006:8). By crowding out the most qualified personnel from the administration, foreign aid has undermined the development of strong institutions.

The large volume of foreign aid in the postconflict period has reduced the need for the Congolese government to tax the citizenry, yet such taxation is considered central to building the capacity of institutions (Moss, Pettersson, and Wan der Walle 2006:10). When citizens surrender part of

their earnings to the state, there is a greater incentive to create an effective and honest bureaucracy to encourage compliance (Moore and Harrison 2005:30). Foreign aid acts as a “substitute for domestic revenue mobilisation whilst allowing the same level of expenditure” (Moss, Pettersson, and Wander Walle 2006:11). It is not surprising, therefore, that in the postconflict period with high levels of foreign aid there has not been a concerted effort to create an effective taxation system and the capacity building of democratic institutions that this requires.

The volatility of foreign aid, combined with a high level of Congolese aid dependence, has undermined the ability of the Congolese government to budget effectively. Foreign-aid flows are dependent on funds from donor countries and international financial institutions whose priorities are vulnerable to external considerations; as a result, foreign aid inflows can be difficult to predict. The tendency of donors to overestimate the quantity of future aid disbursements augments this problem (McGillvray and Morrissey 2001). This problem was clearly evident in the first budget passed by the Kabila government in 2007. The budget outlined spending worth US\$2.4 billion based on the assumption that international donors would fund more than half the budget (*Africa Confidential* 2007b:1).

The postconflict period has seen the DRC improve politically and economically with the support of foreign donors. Foreign aid has promoted democratic reform, lending particularly strong support to the electoral process. By establishing opportunities for corruption and patronage, Western foreign aid has provided an incentive for the Congolese ruling elite to accept democratic reform. However, the government does not appear to have any commitment to democracy beyond this. At the same time foreign aid has actually undermined the establishment of strong democratic institutions in the DRC. Because democratic reform is based on aid-linked pressure from foreign governments rather than a groundswell of popular support, the regime is vulnerable to authoritarian drift.

Chinese Investment and the Competitive Authoritarian Continuum

Levitsky and Way note that a vast spectrum of regimes falls under the competitive authoritarian umbrella: from competitive and transparent political systems such as Botswana to Mugabe’s Zimbabwe, in which elections represent a narrow opening for democratic competition. Given the range of regimes that falls under this hybrid regime subtype, a regime can shift significantly while remaining within the conceptual bounds of competitive authoritarianism. The Kabila regime may shift in either a democratic or an authoritarian direction while still remaining competitive authoritarian. This paper will now explore two sources of pressure—a decrease in democratically conditional foreign aid and an increase in politically unconditional Chinese investment—which may push the regime in a more authoritarian direction.

The DRC has been dependent on foreign aid inflows to reconstruct the country to a level of functionality. Kabila announced in 2007 that US\$14 billion would be needed over the next five years to rebuild the economy, reduce poverty, and improve the country's infrastructure. It is estimated that half of this money would have to come from international donors (Rights and Accountability in Development 2007:2). While donors have pledged US\$4 billion over the next four years (World Bank 2007:1), foreign aid is characterized by an overestimation of future flows.

Furthermore, with the success of the democratic elections in 2006, the DRC is no longer classified as "emerging from conflict." For the purposes of the international financial institutions, it is considered a normal least-developed country (*Africa Confidential* 2007b:1). As a result the government must observe normal standards of governance and government expenditure in order to continue to receive similar levels of financial support. As the current administration falls far short of these standards there is likely to be a decrease in foreign aid.

A decrease in foreign aid would mean that there is less incentive for the regime to strengthen and expand the democratization process. In other words, if democratically conditional foreign aid ceases to become a lucrative endeavor for the ruling elite, there is less likelihood of further democratic reform. This is particularly relevant to the DRC, where the recent democratization has been heavily based on foreign aid as opposed to wide popular support.

Against a backdrop of uncertain foreign aid inflows, the Kabila regime has entered into a structured mining project with a group of Chinese enterprises worth US\$9.25 billion. On 22 April 2008 China Railway Group Limited and Sinohydro entered into the Sicominés deal with the Congolese government (Lumbi 2008:5). Under the deal revenue from a joint mining venture will be used to guarantee and finance extensive infrastructure works to be carried out by the Chinese enterprises (*Africa Research Bulletin* 2008). The current value of the mines is estimated at US\$80–85 billion,⁶ containing an estimated "10.6 million tonnes of copper (about 70% of world annual production) and 629,000 tonnes of cobalt (more than 10 years of global annual production)" (*Africa Research Bulletin* 2008). The Chinese enterprises will take a 68 percent share in the mining venture with the Congolese parastatal⁷ Société Général Congolaise des Minerals (subsequently known as Société Général des carriers et mines du Zaïre) controlling the remaining 32 percent (Lumbi 2008:3).

The proceeds from the mining deal will be used to finance infrastructure projects across the country. The deal includes the upgrade, modernization, and construction of 3,215 kilometres of railway on the Ilebo-Lubumbashi line linking Katanga with the province of Bas-Congo (Davies 2008:53), in addition to 3,900 kilometres of asphalt and 2,738 kilometres of beaten-earth roadwork projects (Lumbi 2008:4). Addressing the five development priorities—water, electricity, education, health, transport—outlined by the government's five-year plan (Vandaele 2008), the agreement undertakes to

build 32 hospitals, 145 health centers, two hydroelectric dams, 5,000 houses, two universities, and two vocational training centers, and upgrade two airports (Goma and Bukavu) and two electricity-distribution grids (Kinshasa and Lubumbashi) (Lumbi 2008:4).

This Sicomines deal is in line with the distinctive Chinese approach to investment that has emerged in infrastructure and mining projects across the African continent. The Chinese government claims that this approach, characterized by economic assistance, tailored-investment projects, and the deliberate decoupling of investment and politics, takes the aspirations of developing states seriously while respecting sovereignty and political non-interference (Sautman and Hairong 2007:78). The Chinese government has expressed a willingness to work with any state regardless of its international standing, including governments that the West has tried to isolate for failing to promote democracy or respect human rights, including the Sudan, Zimbabwe, and Myanmar (Zweig and Jianhai 2005:28).

Regime legitimacy in the DRC, and generally throughout Africa, is heavily dependent on economic performance. Nigerian scholar Claude Ake contends that “ordinary Africans do not separate political democracy from economic democracy or for that matter from economic well-being” (1993:241). In other words, the population is likely to withdraw support for democracy if it fails to provide collective economic improvement. On the one hand, if foreign aid and the economic benefits that it provides decrease, the Congolese citizenry may withdraw their support for the democratization process; on the other hand, if the Chinese investment results in tangible collective benefits, it may bolster popular support for the regime despite the lack of democratic conditionalities. Because of the interests of the Chinese enterprises, there is a strong likelihood that the infrastructure projects outlined by the deal will materialize.

By channeling the proceeds of the mining venture directly into infrastructure projects, to be managed and overseen by the Chinese enterprises, the structured nature of the Sicomines deal limits opportunities for corruption. However, just as the Chinese government does not try to impose economic and political conditions on developing countries, it does not require that the rules of transparency and good governance be observed (Niquet 2006:6). Indeed, Congolese politicians and NGOs operating in the DRC have already expressed their frustration over the lack of transparency which has characterized the government’s dealings with the Chinese enterprises (Global Witness 2008).

Information about the Sicomines deal is not readily available from Chinese or Congolese government sources. There is a near total lack of transparency regarding the Sicomines deal from Chinese government English-language sources. Hubbard argues that open Chinese language sources are far from comprehensive (2007:8). This paper is heavily indebted to the Minister of Infrastructure and Public Work’s address to the Congolese General Assembly (Lumbi 2008:5) for information on the Sicomines deal.

In the past, Western foreign aid represented a lucrative source of revenue. To access this aid, the Congolese regime has been willing to accept the associated democratic reform. However, politically unconditional Chinese investment is beginning to challenge the monopoly over foreign influence and investment that Western donors held in the postconflict period. A decrease in Western aid in conjunction with an increase in politically unconditional Chinese investment is likely to push the DRC in a more authoritarian direction. The relatively independent media and opposition elements may protest such a shift; however, if the regime can produce economic growth it may foster popular support regardless. The Kabila regime may shift in an authoritarian direction; however, it is likely to remain within the conceptual bounds of competitive authoritarianism as in the current international milieu purely authoritarian regimes are difficult to sustain.

Concluding Remarks

In 2006 the DRC held multiparty elections for the first time in more than forty years. While elections are an important component of democracy, free and fair elections alone do not constitute democracy. In the DRC the legislature, media, and electoral arena foster meaningful democratic contestation. However, the Kabila regime has systematically violated this competition to such an extent that the regime does not meet the minimum conditions of a modern democracy. The interaction between the government and democratic contestation in the DRC clearly establishes the regime as competitive authoritarian.

Established as a pillar of the Congolese political tradition in the Mobutu period, corruption and patronage remain entrenched at every level of the administration. While the postconflict influx of foreign aid has spurred much-needed postconflict reconstruction, it has fed into corruption and patronage networks. The ruling elite have accepted democratic reform linked to foreign aid insofar as it does not represent a significant challenge to the established system of patronage networks.

The postconflict democratization process has not incorporated the popular Congolese democratic movement; rather, this reform has been based on pressure from Western donors applied through politically conditional foreign aid. As a result, the regime is particularly vulnerable to authoritarian drift within the conceptual bounds of competitive authoritarianism. Furthermore the recent increase in politically unconditional Chinese investment is likely to push the regime in a more authoritarian direction particularly if combined with a decrease in politically conditional foreign aid.

This study is not an abstract inquiry: the future of democracy in the DRC will have very real implications for the Congolese people. Furthermore, because of its size, location, and political and economic influence, the DRC, according to the United Nations, has the potential to “provide added value

to virtually the entire African continent" (MONUC 2006). With Western aid being scaled back across the continent alongside an expansion in Chinese investment, it is vital that we understand what this means for the future of African democracy.

NOTES

1. For example, see Brooker 2000; Levitsky and Way 2002; and Zakaria 1997.
2. For example the murder of human rights defender and journalist Serge Maheshe. Women human-rights defenders are reportedly subjected to targeted rapes and threats of rape or sexual violence against themselves and their children (MONUC 2007–2008).
3. The price of copper fell from US\$5,375 in 1970 to US\$2,609 in 1987 (Kalala 1990:64).
4. The shift from copper extraction to artisanal mining further undercut the power of the government in the mining sector and reduced state revenue (Ross 2002).
5. For more information see Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative . 2009.
6. This price is current as of July 2008; see *Africa Research Bulletin* 2008.
7. Parastatals are semiautonomous quasigovernmental enterprises. They fall between state-owned enterprises and private-sector enterprises. In the DRC parastatals are typically wholly owned by the government; however, unlike SOEs, parastatals have their own board of directors, distinct from but still under the authority of the government.

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