

The Political Hidden Costs of Power-Sharing in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Alice Grégoire and
Koen Vlassenroot



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Cover photo: All the city's walls are covered with the campaign posters of the many candidates – Bukavu, December 2023. © Koen Vlassenroot and Alice Grégoire.

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Introduction

On 24 October 2024, recently re-elected President Félix Tshisekedi announced publicly for the first time his intention to change the Constitution, claiming it had been drafted by “foreigners in a foreign country” and suggesting that it would hold back efforts to fight the war against the Mouvement du 23 mars (M23) in the east of the country.¹ The Constitution referred to was adopted by referendum in December 2005 following the provisions of the 2003 Global and Inclusive Agreement (AGI) which, officially, put an end to the Second Congolese War. Twenty years after its signature and the integration of the main belligerents into the political system, the DRC has seen four rounds of general elections.

Recent developments compel us to raise the question of the legacy of the AGI in Congo’s existing political system: first the boycott of the last elections by the political party of former President Joseph Kabila, followed by President Tshisekedi’s announcement to change the Constitution, and finally, the declared intention of Corneille Nangaa, leader of the Alliance du Fleuve Congo (AFC), to seize power in Kinshasa by force with the help of the M23.² While the current institutions resulting from a power-sharing agreement have had some sustainability and stability and even saw the first “peaceful” change in power in the history of the country, following the 2018 elections, violent conflicts in the DRC did not end with the implementation of

¹ <https://www.radiookapi.net/2024/10/24/emissions/dialogue-entre-congolais/kisangani-felix-tshisekedi-annonce-lavenement-dune>.

² RDC: le M23, à Goma “pour y rester”, veut marcher “jusqu’à Kinshasa” | AFP Extrait <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WFr-9YlmaGE>.

the 2006 Constitution but have become even more protracted, fragmented and violent. Today, war in eastern DRC has even evolved into a serious threat to regime stability.

The AGI and the institutional strategy resulting from the transitional period (2003–06) have entangled conflict deeply within the larger political dynamics of the DRC. It forces us to take a closer look at their interconnection, not only to better understand political processes in Kinshasa, but also to fully unravel conflict drivers in the eastern parts of the country. The two decades that have passed since the AGI, and the recent presidential call for Constitutional change, invite us to look at “the hidden costs of power-sharing” introduced by the AGI (Tull & Mehler 2005). This report offers a detailed analysis of “post-war” political dynamics in the DRC following the AGI. It has the ambition to provide a tool for a better understanding of the changes that these dynamics have produced in Congo’s political system and in existing drivers of conflict in the eastern parts of the country. The analysis is informed by a database of all members of Congolese government since the start of the transitional period in 2003. While we acknowledge the limits of this database (members of parliament, Provincial Governments and Parliaments and other important public positions are not included in the database), we argue that it allows us to reveal how the current regime, through the continuation of a politics of inclusion, is currently building a strategy for political change.

The Political Cost of Power-Sharing

In a 2005 *African Affairs* article, Denis Tull and Andreas Mehler argue that the logic of inclusive agreements is indicative to how armed violence can be an effective means for non-state actors to acquire overlapping positions of power and economic accumulation. In many cases, Western international actors, pursuing their power-sharing peacebuilding rationale, have given credit and recognition to these armed groups: they invite them to peace talks and integrate them into power-sharing agreements. The same groups have often developed extraversion strategies and have resorted to violence to make their way to the negotiation table and secure state power positions following the signing of inclusive agreements (Tull & Mehler 2005).

The case of the DRC seems to confirm this observation in many respects. It has seen several waves of co-optation of rebel and armed actors into its security forces and institutional political arena. A notorious example was the integration of Laurent Nkunda's Rwanda-backed rebel movement, the Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple (CNDP), which in 2009 transformed into a political party and joined the Alliance pour la Majorité Présidentielle (AMP), former Congolese President Joseph Kabila's political platform at the time. Following negotiations, the CNDP's combatants were integrated into the national army and conducted joint operations with the Rwandan military against the FDLR. In 2012, out of dissatisfaction, some of them formed a new armed movement, the Mouvement du 23 mars (M23). For them, the Congolese government had not fully implemented the 2009 agreement with the CNDP. After briefly occupying the city of Goma, in November 2012, Kinshasa managed to galvanize international and regional support and

defeated the group. In response, the M23 renounced its rebellion, and both the Congolese government and the M23 agreed to a set of commitments.³ These allowed the M23 to transform into a political party but neither included the integration of its combatants back into the army nor promise any prominent political positions to its leaders. Eight years later, in November 2021, the same group relaunched military operations against the Congolese state, owing at least in part to failed attempts to obtain its further integration into Congo's politico-military system. The question of the fate of the M23 leadership, together with Rwandan military support, remains one of the key issues holding back regionally led peace talks even if M23 has now taken control over a vast part of the Kivu Provinces.

The case of the M23 suggests that power-sharing agreements can fuel further violence for the purpose of gaining access to positions of power, which is one of the hidden costs of power-sharing agreements identified by Tull and Mehler. Developments from November 2021 onwards even lead us to assert that the AGI has failed to impose the institutional route as the only legitimate one to power. A new politico-military alliance centred on the M23 has stated its intention to use arms to seize power and overthrow the current regime. On 15 December 2023, the creation of the AFC was publicly announced from Nairobi by its leader, Corneille Nangaa, former chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI), alongside M23 political leader Bertrand Bisimwa. Similarly, former Kabila's party, the PPRD, decided to boycott the 2024 elections and some of its members joined the newly formed AFC.

Ignoring the demands of rebel leaders to be further integrated into the political system while not disposing the necessary resources available to fight them has so far proven ineffective as well. In this report we therefore want to insist on another hidden cost of the power-sharing rationale that Tull and Mehler had not anticipated, which is the political cost. By political cost, we mean the reproduction in the political arena of the logic of inclusion that had governed the negotiation of peace between armed actors. It has

³ Nairobi declarations, 12 December 2013 (https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2013_740.pdf).

been reproduced to such a degree that the ability to include has become a strategic resource enabling those who possess it to control, or even dilute, the competitiveness of the political system. Polarization within such a system hinges mainly on the distinction between players who are included and those who are not.

This polarization tends to align with a cleavage between those who inherited an unarmed political struggle for liberalisation and had been sidelined by the AGI, and those who inherited the conquest of power by armed struggle. For the first time since the AGI, the latter have been increasingly marginalised by the arrival in power of the former. In January 2019, President Kabila could not run Constitutionally for a third mandate, as he had failed to bypass the Constitution following massive popular demonstrations and international pressure. He consequently handed over power to Félix Tshisekedi, who was the president of the 40-year-old opposition party, the Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (UDPS), and the son of the long-time political opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi. This transfer of power was the result of a last-minute and unexpected backroom deal between Tshisekedi and Kabila. Even though Félix Tshisekedi did not win the December 2018 presidential elections, and probably finished third (Englebert 2019), he was eventually the best option for Kabila (and for some of the international community) to maintain his influence over Congo's political scene, and for maintaining political stability. Tshisekedi appointed his coalition partner Vital Kamerhe (the leader of the Union pour la Nation Congolaise – UNC) as chief of his cabinet, while the Parliament remained largely dominated by the Front Commun pour le Congo (FCC), a coalition of political parties around Kabila's own Parti du Peuple pour la Reconstruction et la Démocratie (PPRD). This coalition secured 341 out of 500 seats in the National Assembly during the 2018 parliamentary election. A government was formed out of a vast coalition between the FCC and Cap pour le Changement (CACH), the coalition of Tshisekedi's UDPS and Kamerhe's UNC. By the end of 2020, Tshisekedi managed to break his "alliance of dependency" with former President Kabila, form an alternative majority in Parliament through a vast new coalition called the Union Sacrée de la Nation (USN), and increasingly gain autonomy, all this in time to monopolize the means for organizing the next round of elections in 2023 and securing his next mandate. His strategy proved successful: in

December 2023, he won the presidential election, gained a large majority in Parliament, and carried almost all 26 provincial governorships, even if only two of his ruling coalition's victors were members of his own UPDS party.

Whereas according to Tull and Mehler “the relationship (...) between flawed democracy and violent conflict is that the road to state power in electoral autocracies is usually closed to non-violent political actors” (Tull & Mehler 2005: 391), the case of the DRC since Tshisekedi took power raises at least two additional questions: How to explain that even when one of these non-violent (i.e. non-armed) political actors gains access to power, democracy remains flawed and conflict continues to smoulder or even reignites? And what legacy of the war and the inclusive agreement are the new political elites in charge dealing with, and how are they supposed to do so?

Regarding the second question, Tull and Mehler already noted that “power-sharing formulas allow many rebel leaders to behave in office much as in wartime (...), thus tapping the combined revenues deriving from peace and sovereignty rents as well as war economies” (Tull & Mehler 2005: 392–393). This observation, when referring to the DRC, would entail that the main legacy of the AGI lies in exercising and competing for power. As for the first question, two additional elements should be taken into consideration: the way *elections* are linked with “flawed democracy” and with violent conflict; and, simply put, the impact of external influences and actions.

Answering these additional questions in detail goes beyond the scope of this report, which focuses on providing greater understanding of the connections between the AGI and this “flawed democracy” in the DRC. In this report, we argue that in the current context, for the Tshisekedi-led political elite which aimed to win the elections, signing a new inclusive agreement with a rebel force (the M23) that is supported by a foreign country with a long history of destabilizing the DRC would mean committing electoral suicide. Signing an inclusive agreement with the AFC, in spite of their open agenda to overthrow the regime in Kinshasa, simply would not make much sense either. For the same political elite, not signing agreements that could put an end to the war while lacking the resources to win the fight (or even stand a chance) against its perpetrators would not make any more sense as a political strategy.

In these circumstances, politicizing the war and militarizing the elections proved to be the easiest way to retain power. As is argued in this report, the political compromises made out of this strategy can only result in the reproduction of the system and of the practices inherited from the AGI, which we explain as the AGI's hidden political cost. The AGI, indeed, equates inclusion with peace, peace with democratisation, and democratisation with elections.

Most observers consider current politics to be a mere continuity of Congo's political dynamics that were already in place during the Kabila era and already during the reign of Mobutu. This report examines, through the prism of the trajectory of the UDPS, the strategies of the Tshisekedi regime to distance itself from Kabila's rule. Such reading helps us to reveal in this assumed continuity a course towards a political change to which, during decades of opposition, Tshisekedi's political party aspired.

Our analysis is guided by a detailed database including all individuals who have served in a Congolese government since the start of the transitional period in 2003. The database contains 434 individuals and for each of them information was gathered on the social trajectory (studies, region of origin, age, etc.) and political trajectory (political parties over time, governments, legislative elections, etc.) for each of them. A constant work in progress, the database is filled using several triangulated sources including *Biographie des acteurs politiques de la IIIème République* (Omasombo et al. 2009), publicly accessible CENI documents, online information gathered by the Talatala project, and press articles. In addition, the analysis provided in this report draws on several observations in Kinshasa in June 2023 and Bukavu in December 2023, in the run-up to the elections. We understand that this database is not including other parts of Congo's political elite, including members of parliament and provincial assemblies, provincial governments, and others. While we recognize that this limit might impact our analysis, we believe that a sole focus on members of Congolese governments allows us to understand the larger logics of current political dynamics which eventually might lead to political change.

Inclusion as Heritage

The 2003 AGI set in motion a renewed proliferation of political parties, a dynamic that finds its roots in the multi-party politics resulting from former President Mobutu's announcement of a democratization process in 1990. At the time of this announcement, Zaire's political system was marked by a trade-off between rent-seeking and political loyalty, turning economic assets into political resources. The regime relied on the strategic distribution of resources and informal politics, as noted by Denis Tull, who emphasized that the system's persistence stemmed from complex networks connecting high-ranking officials with local power holders (Tull 2005: 277). These networks primarily provided opportunities to access resources rather than the resources themselves. Mobutu aimed to maintain stability among the ruling class while fostering uncertainty among its members to prevent opposition. This all came under pressure when foreign supporters conditioned their assistance to democratic reform and good governance. It should be noted, though, that Mobutu's rule was also increasingly challenged from inside. Due to lack of investment and constant plundering of assets, a rapid decline of the country's industrial economy eventually led to a gradual transition from foreign dependence to decentralized patronage networks as the basis of political power (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers 2008). One strategy was to initiate a process of democratization. Another was to rely on a divide-and-rule strategy, with ethnicity as a key principle, to fragilize political parties and avoid the institution of a strong opposition force. This last strategy included the introduction of the principle of *géo-politique*, which only allowed political positions to be occupied by political leaders in their own region of origin.

To a certain extent, the political system which resulted from the AGI and was guided by the principle of inclusion, has allowed for the revival of pre-war political dynamics and logic. During the 2003-2006 Transition Period, it also allowed new politico-military elites from armed movements to enter national politics, turned elections into a means of inclusion, and mobilized inclusion as a tool for the consolidation of a political regime. With the main exceptions of current President Tshisekedi's Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (UDPS) and the Parti Lumumbiste Unifié (PALU), and some smaller political parties, this was largely to the detriment of an old political guard from the independence struggle and the Mobutu regime (1965–1997).

Some elites from the 2003–2006 Transition Period were “recycled” to serve in Kabila's regime. Tshisekedi's 2019 arrival into power marked a clear break, with those who had been part of Kabila's political inner circle no longer being nominated. This replacement of political elites in government positions for Tshisekedi's was a deliberate strategy for consolidating a discontinuity with the Kabila regime. At the same time, he tried to set his own course, which he did through his investment in new alliances with a number of former rebel leaders and political elites who played a leading role during the Transition Period but over the years had been either “left on the sidelines” by the Kabila regime or distanced themselves from Kabila's inner circle. Two examples to cite here are Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo and Vital Kamerhe (see below for further details).

A closer look at the social and political trajectory of all individuals who have been part of a Congolese government since the start of the transitional period illustrates in detail Tshisekedi's strategy of new political alliance building. Of the 76 people who were in office in the transitional government, either as vice-president, minister or vice-minister, 27 returned at least once in governments during the post-transition Kabila era (2006–2019), and 20 were appointed at least twice. Most of them shared a similar background: they were typically men born in the 1950s who had a history of past involvement with former rebel movements and became political elites before the Second Congo War (1998–2003) or even during the Mobutu era. At least five of them also held a position in one of President Kabila's cabinet; at least 13 originated from the eastern part of the country, i.e. the former Katanga and Orientale

Provinces, South Kivu, North Kivu and Maniema; six originated from the former Equateur province (Mobutu's home province).

The same database also allows us to reconsider the weight of the AGI's influence in the selection and reproduction of political elites through their appointment in government positions since Tshisekedi came to power. When visualized as a network, the data shows that only 13 individuals served as “bridges” between the governments of the Kabila era and those of Tshisekedi and his Union Sacrée de la Nation (USN) (2019–24). Only two of the 13 belonged to the PPRD (Kabila's political party) in 2018: Adrien Bokele Djema and Godard Motemona Gibolum. Both were MPs in the National Assembly between 2018 and 2021 and at the end of 2020 joined the Union Sacrée de la Nation (USN), the coalition formed by Tshisekedi to break his alliance with Kabila. Only one of these 13 is a current member of the UDPS; he had been minister in the government led by Prime Minister Bruno Tshibala (2017–19). Tshibala himself had also been a UDPS member until his ouster from the party in March 2017.⁴

Only four former members of the Transition government (2003-2006) have been appointed though in a government since the end of the coalition between Tshisekedi and Kabila, or the real start of the Tshisekedi era starting in 2020. This observation indicates, without surprise, that the change in power and access to state power of a historical non-armed political party (the UPDS), eventually also resulted in a shift in political elites dominating Kabila's rule. Two of these former members of the Transition Government have been cited above because of their roots in rebel movements or pre-Kabila political elites: Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo (MLC – Mouvement de Libération du Congo, Equateur) and Vital Kamerhe (UNC, South-Kivu). The two others are François Muamba Tshishimbi, who originates from East-Kasai, and Antipas

⁴ This government was formed following the Saint Sylvestre agreement, a comprehensive and inclusive political agreement which was signed at the end of 2016, following long negotiations between President Kabila and the political opposition, including Etienne Tshisekedi's UDPS and mediated by the Congolese Episcopal Conference (CENCO). It was concluded by the signing parties that Kabila would respect the Constitution and would not run for a third term, and that there would be a consensual management of the country until a new president was elected, at the latest one year after the signing of the agreement. Etienne Tshisekedi, who passed away on 1 February 2017, had been appointed to lead the oversight committee for the implementation of the political agreement (CNSA).

Mbusa Nyamwisi, co-founder of the RCD and former leader of the RCD-K-ML, who was not reappointed to the Suminwa government.

Jean-Pierre Bemba is the founder and president of the MLC political party originating from the former MLC rebel group, and one of the pillars of the vast coalition formed by Tshisekedi to gain power over the state institutions and get rid of Kabila's backroom control. Etienne Tshisekedi, the father of Félix Tshisekedi, had personal ties with Jean-Pierre Bemba and with his father, an important businessman. During the 2003-2006 Transitional Period, Bemba was one of the four vice-presidents. In 2006, Etienne Tshisekedi, who was boycotting the first general elections, unsuccessfully tried to discourage Bemba from running for president against Kabila because he was convinced that the election was rigged. In the end, Bemba lost to Kabila, but, in 2007, was elected senator before being arrested in Europe, while in exile, on charges of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2009.

Historically, Bemba's MLC and the UDPS had close ties, and pioneer members of the UDPS moved to the MLC when it was created in 1999. This was the case for François Muamba Tshishimbi, the second of the three former transitional government members co-opted under Tshisekedi's presidency. During the 1980s, Muamba Tshishimbi, who shares the same Luba ethnic background as the Tshisekedis, was the president of the UDPS in exile in France, a strategic UDPS branch at the time when the party was illegal in the DRC. He became a minister under Mobutu, between 1991 and 1997, and joined the MLC and represented it during the discussions in Sun City that resulted in the AGI. During the Transitional Period, he was the minister of budget as part of the MLC component in the transitional government. From its creation in March 2020, he led the Conseil Présidentiel de Veille stratégique (CPVS), which was integrated in Tshisekedi's presidential office (a veritable parallel government during the transition with Kabila) and played a key role in the preparation of his campaign.⁵ Both Jean-Pierre Bemba and François Muamba Tshishimbi studied at the Brussels Management School, ICHEC.

⁵ The deputy coordinator of the CPVS was Judith Suminwa, who was appointed, in 2024, Prime Minister following the re-election of Félix Tshisekedi.

Finally, Vital Kamerhe, who originates from South Kivu, in eastern DRC, and also has a background in the UDPS, became Tshisekedi's political ally in 2018 when they formed the CACH coalition to run against Kabila. This coalition was created in Nairobi following the selection by the Lamuka opposition coalition of Martin Fayulu over Tshisekedi to run as the unified candidate of the opposition in the December 2018 presidential election. Kamerhe was National Assembly president from 2006 to 2009; he resigned and created the UNC in 2010. He was appointed chief of President Tshisekedi's office in 2019. One year later, however, the relationship suffered, as Kamerhe was convicted for the embezzlement of public funds and sent to jail. Following his release, in 2022, he re-entered politics as a close ally of Tshisekedi. In 2023, ahead of the elections, he joined the government as deputy prime minister in charge of the economy.

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Not a Win for Everyone

The main losers in this break in the recycling of political elites following Tshisekedi's arrival at power, are most of the other former members of armed movements which were operating during the two Congo Wars. This is particularly the case for those who have been part of rebel groups supported by Rwanda, such as Laurent-Désiré Kabila's Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération (AFDL), and the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie-Goma (RCD-Goma). Only Mbusa Nyamwisi, the former leader of the Uganda-supported Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie/Kisangani-Mouvement de Libération (RCD-K-ML) and who had also been in government during the Kabila era, has been reappointed to a government position since the break of the FCC-CACH coalition in 2020. In March 2023, he became minister for regional integration. For other former rebels turned political actors, the only way to secure access to power was to run for office during the national legislative elections, a strategy which, in 2023, proved not as successful as expected.

While it is often assumed that, following power-sharing arrangements as part of peace agreements, former leaders of armed movements manage to convert their military capacity into political power thanks to their integration into the post-conflict institutional framework, our data indicate that this integration indeed is more nuanced than it seems. Even more, it

is conditioned by their successful individual integration into party politics rather than by a transformation of rebel structures into political parties. At the same time, the success of a political (re)positioning in most cases does not seem to last. As our database reveals, most of the members of the transitional government who stood in the 2006 legislative elections were elected as MPs. Their election was in most cases conditioned by their running on the list of Kabila's PPRD party or a list which was part of Kabila's political platform, the Alliance pour la Majorité Présidentielle (AMP). The victories of RCD-G and RCD-K/ML candidates in the 2006 legislative election were a bit less systematic than those of other political movements and party lists. This reveals that consolidating their position in the institutional political game depended on their co-optation by the regime and/or by political parties with an actual chance to win seats in the next election. Overall, it can be concluded that during Kabila's presidency, RCD-G and RCD-K/ML political elites were only able to remain in the political system through their change of political loyalty. Some of them who were not elected in 2006 succeeded in getting elected in 2011 or 2018 (or both), mainly because they had joined the presidential majority. In return for their loyalty, during the Kabila era, former members of the RCD-G and the RCD-K/ML were also appointed to government posts yet in most cases they were not the same as those who represented the two movements in the transitional government. Only Antipas Mbusa Nyamwisi has been appointed again in government since Tshisekedi broke his coalition with Kabila's FCC and created his USN.

While this growing tendency to exclude (more easily) former representatives of the RCD-G does not come as a surprise, the question remains whether this also conceals a marginalization from power of political elites from specific provinces or ethnic communities historically associated with the RCD-G. Our database did not allow a thorough assessment of the representation of ethnic communities in government over time. Moreover, a wide range of senior positions (e.g., in the army) would have to be taken in account to assess the representation of ethnic communities in the regime. What can be asserted, however, is that those politicians of Tutsi or Banyamulenge origin who had been part of a government during the Kabila presidency have not been appointed in a government since the formation of the USN in 2020. It

is not possible though to assert the role played by their ethnic background in this exclusion.⁶

As for the regional origins of individuals who have been part of a government since 2003, eastern provinces rather seem to have been over-represented in government following the AGI, and even more so after the election of Kabila in 2006, to the detriment of other DRC regions. Government members originating from South Kivu, North Kivu, Maniema and the former provinces of Katanga and Orientale represented around 40% of the government from 2003 until the Badibanga government of 2015. Since then, their representation has steadily decreased to approximately 30% of all government positions. With only around 10% of government members between 2006 and 2012, the Greater Kasai provinces (Kasai Central, Kasai Oriental, Lomani and Sankuru) have been under-represented in the post-2006 governments under Kabila. One obvious explanation is the boycott of the 2006 elections by the UDPS. However, it also suggests a deliberate strategy by the Kabila regime to marginalize political elites from the Kasai provinces assimilated with the UDPS, which was identified as a radical opposition party at the time.

The influence of the Grand Kasai increased again from Matata Ponyo's second mandate, which chronologically corresponds with the start of negotiations between the UDPS and the Kabila regime following the claim of victory by the late Etienne Tshisekedi in the 2011 elections.⁷ At the end of Kabila's second mandate (2016), negotiations took place between the regime and opposition parties led by the UDPS. These resulted in the nomination of a prime minister, Samy Badibanga, from the opposition in December 2016. He was succeeded as prime minister, in May 2017, by Bruno Tshibala, another (former) leading member of the UDPS.

⁶ What renders such an assessment difficult is that the ethnic background often coincides with other factors that can be considered to be more predominant in explaining exclusion from government positions since Tshisekedi came to power, including the previous involvement in a rebel movement or membership in Kabila's party or one of his party coalitions. In addition, ethnic minorities from eastern Congo are still represented in the recent government. At least one member of the Congolese Tutsi community holds a post in the current government, as do two Nande members.

⁷ These negotiations took place in Venice and Ibiza and (officially) ended in September 2015 when the UDPS withdrew from the process. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/264146/politique/rdc-ludps-de-tshisekedi-annonce-lechec-negociations-camp-kabila/>.

The widespread belief that Tshisekedi's rise to power merely reproduced the Kabila system without representing a significant change of personnel thus does not hold up to scrutiny when looking at government positions. Of course, the government is not the only place where political elites get "recycled". Whereas such recycling within governments is based on appointments and therefore on a form of direct co-optation into the regime, at the National Assembly it is the outcome of elections. Logically, we might expect the selection of political elites sitting in the National Assembly to be (somewhat) less dependent on regime loyalty. Our analysis suggests a different reality, however. The 2023 elections, which were boycotted by the Kabila-led coalition of political parties, reveal that the election of candidates who were former members of government, was conditioned by their membership of a party which had joined the USN (the coalition formed by Tshisekedi), regardless of their regional origin and/or ethnicity. Even more significantly, these candidates almost systematically failed to be elected when they were not part of the USN. Alignment with a member party of the ruling coalition has proven just as crucial and necessary (but not sufficient) to be elected to the National Assembly as it was to be appointed to government. It leads to the conclusion that a crucial part of the electoral stakes is set before the vote through the positioning of political parties and coalition dynamics instituted by the regime. This was equally the case during the Kabila era and the building of the USN, which in support of Tshisekedi has also been characterized by strategic inclusiveness.

It can be concluded that over the years, the AGI's legacy is no longer (only) to be found in the recycling of political elites co-opted by the AGI into the arena of Congolese institutional politics, in the fate of former rebel leaders turned politicians, or in the influence of eastern provinces in government. Our database suggests that competition for access to political institutions has increasingly revolved around the regime and the party in power. This of course comes as no surprise and can be considered part of broader attempts to consolidate a political regime. What's more, despite an apparently flourishing multiparty system counting no fewer than 910 political parties in 2023, the competitiveness within this system seems to be very limited.⁸ The AGI's true

⁸ More in-depth research, that falls beyond the scope of this report, is needed to define and assess the competitiveness of the system. It would also be interesting to have a similar database and analysis of tendencies at the provincial level.

legacy is thus to be identified in the logic of inclusiveness. This inclusiveness and power-sharing, which was a cornerstone of the 2003 agreement, has expanded beyond armed actors. It has become a practice of political power that applies to the entire political system, in which political parties, although undoubtedly the system's main players, compete primarily to gain access to state resources through the dynamics of coalition building, rather than to define the direction of the state's public policy.

Party Politics as an Inclusive Agreement?

The AGI has also had a determining impact on the nature of politics and the creation of its main protagonists, i.e. the political parties which have become the key players in the competition for access to state resources. As already mentioned above, for political elites this access is rarely determined only by membership in a party. A direct affiliation of this party to the regime is a key condition to be part of the control and redistribution of state resources and is itself the result of complex alliance-building that is (mostly) negotiated in the run-up to elections. It can therefore be stated that the AGI's major legacies not only include the rise to power and consolidation of power by specific dominant political parties, including Kabila's PPRD and a few other major political parties, but also the transformation or further consolidation of party politics into a system of redistribution of resources through the exercise of power.

In this section, we analyse how a new AGI logic of inclusion evolved into a political tool that has served the regime throughout various electoral cycles, ultimately becoming a fundamental aspect of electoral dynamics and regime consolidation. The strategic use of inclusion allows those with the resources of the state to remain in power, ensure some institutional stability in (particularly electoral) contexts that are otherwise highly uncertain, and manage rival political aspirations.

Although, as mentioned already, the DRC today has 910 official political parties, only a handful have succeeded in becoming dominant players in Congolese politics. Major political parties have gained a crucial role in the

selection of (new) members to the political elite and should be considered more than just labels or personal enterprises. To some extent, political parties are socio-cultural enterprises embedded in society and sometimes in specific ethnic communities. They are platforms for the conversion of one's capital into a political position, and a stomping ground for future politicians. However, most of the DRC's major parties institutionalized themselves, either during the transitional period or in the Kabila regime, by exploiting their access to AGI institutions and by strategically positioning their leaderships.⁹ This is the case of the MLC led by Jean-Pierre Bemba, who was a vice-president during the transitional period, Kabila's PPRD and, to a lesser extent, Antoine Gizenga's Parti Lumumbiste unifié (PALU), which headed two governments (2006–08) following an agreement reached with Kabila during the 2006 presidential elections.

Other parties created after 2006 that have managed to make their mark in Congo's political competition, were the result of factionalism within the PPRD and were created by former politicians of the Kabila regime following their resignations. These parties include Vital Kamerhe's Union pour la nation congolaise (UNC), Moïse Katumbi's Ensemble pour la République, and Modeste Bahati's Alliance des Forces Démocratiques du Congo (AFDC). In other words, all of the founders or main leaders of the major parties, with the exception of the UDPS, passed through positions of power since the end of the war, either as AGI signatories or because they were co-opted by the Kabila regime (see Table 1 below).

In 2006, the formation of the Alliance pour la Majorité Présidentielle (AMP), a political coalition between the PPRD and various parties represented in the National Assembly, took place gradually before (building of alliances with small parties), after the legislative election (poaching of MPs), and in between the two rounds of the presidential elections (forging an alliance between PPRD and PALU), all with the aim to progressively conclude a majority in Parliament. In preparation of the 2011 elections, each party officially fielded its candidates under its own party label rather than under joint coalition lists,

⁹ By institutionalization, we intend "the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability" (Huntington 1968).

yet membership in the presidential majority had already been established ahead of the ballot. In addition, in December 2010, the Constitution was amended, changing the voting system for electing the president from two rounds to one, giving the presidential camp a major advantage. It further encouraged the building of alliances with the government in the run-up to the elections. At the same time, it disadvantaged political parties negotiating their integration into the ruling coalition as they had no electoral scores to show for beefing up their political weight.

The eventual proliferation of smaller political parties, besides being driven by the individual ambitions of those who founded them, is an effect of the logic of inclusiveness applied as an electoral strategy by major political players, who had acquired positions through the AGI. It contributed, as part of a deliberate strategy to fragilize the opposition, to further political factionalism. During the 2018 legislative elections, for example, creating numerous new political parties and co-opting small existing parties into the ruling coalition, became the PPRD's key strategy for winning the (legislative and provincial) elections. The logic behind the institution of a massive number of small parties affiliated to the presidential majority was to divide the electorate and overwhelm the opposition parties' candidacies with a large number of candidates backed by the presidential majority. Fielding candidates in legislative and provincial elections is a very expensive endeavour, and there is no effective public funding mechanism to support political parties. As a result, political parties affiliated with the ruling regime have a crucial advantage in the election: they are the only ones that can afford to field many candidates in the same constituency. As a result, only those with means, including participants in the regime that gives them access to the necessary (state) resources, can become candidates.

In relation to legislative and presidential elections, DRC political parties can be divided into three main categories: the vast majority of parties that are directly or indirectly affiliated with the presidential majority (and support the presidential candidate during presidential elections); opposition parties that participate in elections; and opposition parties that boycott elections. This division goes along with a distinction between major parties which have a certain level of institutionalization characterized by structure, discipline, rules

and value infusion (i.e. a well-developed ideology and political programme); and most parties that work as satellites to these major parties.

Table 1:
Major political parties in the DRC and their positioning during presidential elections (2006–2024)

PARTY	ORIGIN	2006	2011	2018	2023
UDPS	Created clandestinely in 1981 during Mobutu's regime. Historically led by Etienne Tshisekedi, who died in February 2017. His son Félix Tshisekedi became party president and shortly after DRC president	In opposition and boycotted	In opposition and participated, claimed to have won the presidential elections, boycotted the institutions after finalization of electoral results	In opposition and participated Coalition Cap pour la Changement (CACH) with the UNC	Ruling party and key actor of a large coalition, the Union Sacrée de la Nation (USN)
PALU	Created in exile clandestinely by Antoine Gizenga before the opening of the DRC to multi-partyism in 1990. The party took part in the Conférence Nationale Souveraine (CNS) during the final years of Mobutu's rule and in the Dialogue Inter-Congolais (DIC)	Initially an opposition party. It came third in the first round of the presidential elections and formed a coalition with Kabila in between the two rounds	Member of Kabila's ruling coalition	Member of Kabila's ruling coalition (FCC)	Member of Tshisekedi's ruling coalition (USN)
PPRD	The party is a result of the conversion into politics of the AFDL rebellion in 2002. It was created by Joseph Kabila and his entourage at the same time as the Dialogue Inter-Congolais	Ruling party (president)	Ruling party with a ruling coalition, the Alliance pour la Majorité Présidentielle (AMP)	Ruling party with a ruling coalition, the Front Commun pour la Congo (FCC)	In opposition and boycotted

PARTY	ORIGIN	2006	2011	2018	2023
MLC	Party formed from the conversion, in 2002, of the MLC rebel movement. Both the rebel movement and resulting political party were led by Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo	Party participated in the transitional government and Bemba finished second to Kabila in the presidential election, leading to violence in Kinshasa and Bemba's exile	In opposition and participated in institutions but did not present a presidential candidate, as their leader Bemba was on trial in the Hague (ICC)	In opposition and participated in institutions and Parliamentary elections	Major member of the ruling coalition (USN)
UNC	The UNC resulted from factionalism within the PPRD. It was created in 2010 by Vital Kamerhe in view of his campaign for president in 2011, after which he had to quit as National Assembly president	Party did not exist yet	In opposition and participated in institutions and Parliamentary elections. Vital Kamerhe arrived third in the presidential election	In opposition and participated in institutions and Parliamentary elections, supported Tshisekedi's presidential candidacy as part of the CACH coalition between the UNC and the UDPS	Major member of the ruling coalition (USN)
AFDC	Founded by Modeste Bahati Lukwebo in 2010. Bahati was previously a PPRD member	Did not exist yet	The AFCD was part of the ruling coalition (AMP)	Member of the ruling coalition (FCC)	Major member of the ruling coalition (USN)
Ensemble pour la République (EPR)	Created in 2019 by Moïse Katumbi, PPRD governor of Katanga province between 2007 and 2015	Did not exist yet	Did not exist yet	In opposition and participated in institutions and Parliamentary elections and member of opposition coalition LAMUKA. Supported LAMUKA candidate Martin Fayulu during the presidential election	In opposition and participated in institutions and Parliamentary elections. Katumbi runs for president and finishes second

When looking back at the different electoral processes, it can be concluded that for the regime the aim for inclusiveness has been part of the strategy to stay in power. To survive the elections, Kabila and the PPRD have made use of the same kind of inclusiveness and power-sharing logics as those included in the AGI. For Kabila's regime, such inclusiveness proved a successful approach

to orchestrate competition between political parties and political elites in the run-up to elections. Tshisekedi and the UDPS have pushed this ‘all-inclusive’ logic of the system and its benefits even to another level. For this new regime, the elections were not considered a constraint to its rule but as a tool serving its interests. In 2023, as already mentioned, being included in the ruling coalition was not merely a strategic condition to access power, it had also become a precondition for standing a chance in the elections.

Joseph Kabila gained an absolute majority in the National Assembly after the 2006 elections by co-opting small parties into his coalition (AMP) and by poaching cadres from other parties. Félix Tshisekedi, in preparation of the 2023 elections, already from 2020 onwards mobilized all the means at his disposal to poach cadres from the FCC and to co-opt as many parties and MPs as possible into a new alliance: the Sacred Union of the Nation (USN). This USN allowed Tshisekedi to break his coalition with the FCC and gain the much-needed political autonomy.

Being in the driver’s seat of the organization of the 2023 elections, the UPDS and its larger political coalition, applied a similar strategy to what Kabila had previously developed. A complex network of alliances fostered the creation of new political structures, which were all linked to the USN. A government reshuffle saw major long-time actors in Congolese politics, such as Bemba, Kamhere and Mbusa Nyamwishi, return to the inner circles of national politics. Ultimately, the USN encompassed virtually the entire political spectrum within an exceedingly intricate web of alliances between major parties attached to the USN as well as smaller parties, in some cases through intermediary “platforms” or “alliances”. Even Tshisekedi’s main challenger in the 2023 elections, Moïse Katumbi and his party Ensemble pour la République, were briefly part of the USN yet eventually decided to run against Tshisekedi.

As a result, the USN represented an overwhelmingly broad coalition of political microstructures covering the entire political space. As a result, to stand a chance in the elections, candidates not only needed a party, and parties not only needed to be part of the USN, but these elites and their parties also had to form their own platform of smaller political parties, often called the “mosaïques” (mosaics). Every major party (UDPS, UNC, MLC, AFDC) formed

such mosaic of smaller political parties affiliated with it. More than ever, these major parties seemed to play the role of gatekeepers of the political competition by granting more or less inclusion to smaller political structures that were either created by them or by aspiring candidates. Consequently, the question of knowing whether a political party was included in the coalition in power no longer made much sense. The question now became rather one of knowing how much a given party was included, based on the number of intermediaries and their weight in the USN. In most electoral systems the key question in pre-electoral negotiations between political parties in order to form a coalition would usually be: “How many votes can the coalition win in the next election?” In the DRC, the question had become: “How much inclusion was to be offered to a party when compared to what it can contribute to the regime in terms of credibility, stability and consistency (if it manages to get enough votes anyway)?”

Important to note is that in these political reshuffles, politicians tend to remain loyal to their own political party over time, as our database indicates. This is particularly the case when the party is one of the dominant political forces. Even with the shift of power between Kabila and Tshisekedi, between 2018 and 2023, a clear majority of PPRD politicians, for example, have remained loyal to Kabila’s party, with “only” 42 transfers to the USN (Radio Okapi 2021). This might be explained by the efficiency of mechanisms managing the rewards of political loyalty within the PPRD, and/or by the fact that the Tshisekedi alliance proved to be less inclusive with former politicians from the PPRD than it was with members of other parties. Similarly, members of the other main political parties, including the MLC, UNC, AFDC and PALU, remained loyal to their own political movements. These parties integrated into the USN as political entities rather than via individuals, meaning members did not feel any need to join the USN based on personal incentives. From that perspective, it can be concluded that political parties, rather than individuals, tend to change their allegiance from one president to another, sometimes after factionalist battles within the party.

The Hidden Cost of Power-Sharing

The inclusiveness promoted by the AGI, in the end, was rife with amalgams and misconceptions. The AGI was not only inclusive regarding the political leaderships it co-opted in government; it also tried to include and implement many political models at once, regardless of their relevance to the Congolese political environment and needs. Inclusion has been equated with political representation, leading to a misconception that democratization could result from inclusion. This can easily bring to the misunderstanding that inclusiveness is an indicator of democratization, whereas an inclusive system does not have to be competitive to be inclusive. Yet the democratic ideal promoted by the AGI is a competitive one, given its stress on the need to organize elections in line with the promoted principles of liberal democracy. This extended inclusiveness, in the end, offers significant advantages to the regime in place but poses challenges to the party system and its competitiveness and sustainability.

Firstly, it risks undermining the role of elections as usually intended in the model of liberal democracy. In 2023, all major political parties in power were instrumental in orchestrating competition between aspiring candidates, leading to the argument that they have effectively taken on one of the functions of the elections themselves. Additionally, it can be stated that Tshisekedi and his close partners successfully replicated the entire political competition, controlling (internal) party politics on the one hand and supervising elections on the other. The negotiation of alliances between political parties before but

also after the elections had the effect of concentrating all the stakes of the elections and taking over the role of the vote itself, or, more precisely, giving the vote a completely different purpose (Vlassenroot et al. 2023).

Secondly, it has a hidden cost for political parties aspiring to power and entails several pitfalls for the structuring of Congo's party system. When political parties provide their elites with access to leadership positions, it serves less to secure electoral support from the population than as a strategy to act as tools for the regime that has co-opted them. Only the founders and principal leaders of a political party generally gain access to mandates, and this shapes in return the very way parties institutionalize. It can be argued that this is probably one of the reasons why political parties are primarily centred around individuals rather than around political ideas and messages. Another pitfall of the logic underpinning the negotiation processes aimed at inclusion into alliances within or in support of the regime is that it paradoxically tends to favour those political parties that are already represented in the National Assembly instead of favouring new entrants (with the aim of challenging) in the institutional political arena. It eventually reconfirms this arena as a place that reproduces the existing regime instead of enabling strong opposition.

Thirdly, for the ruling elites (i.e. the main leaders of the regime belonging to the ruling parties), inclusiveness has more than one benefit. Next to ensuring the continuation of a regime beyond an electoral deadline, it also improves the system's predictability. The Tshisekedi regime has been able to exploit the elections in order to manage factionalism and elite ambitions. The USN and its very complex structure of coalitions created a framework for the supervision of political ambitions and for hierarchizing the degree of inclusion in the system. Electoral deadlines, in this sense, are moments that reveal the ambitions of the main challengers entering the political competition. Elections, in their turn, become an opportunity to manage such ambitions. If everyone is initially considered part of the majority, voting becomes a symbolic act of censure that determines the degree of inclusion or exclusion of "partners", without assigning the responsibility for exclusion to any specific individual. In cumulating and including small parties and players that are entirely dependent on those controlling the game, as has been the case in the formation of the Suminwa government, Tshisekedi and the UDPS

make themselves less dependent on larger parties and create the necessary space to make structural changes aimed at consolidating power and testing loyalties. Finally, the more inclusive the regime becomes, i.e. the more parties and candidates it manages to co-opt into a ruling coalition, the more it can display a “democratic” front while ensuring that it wins every vote.

From Divide and Conquer to Multiply and Conquer

The way in which Tshisekedi and the UDPS have freed themselves from their alliance with Kabila, and the way in which they managed the 2023 elections, tend to suggest that the UDPS eventually turned a system that had been imposed on them against the political actors who primarily benefited from it. The resulting question is: are Tshisekedi and the UDPS merely reproducing that system, or are they using the system's tools to change it? How can this apparent contradiction between what the UDPS, as a historically radical opposition party, claims to stand for and their practice of power be reconciled?

The party, more than any other actor present at Sun City during the Dialogue Inter-Congolais (DiC) which eventually resulted in the signing of the AGI, has experienced the limits of the inclusiveness logic, as it was marginalized by the concluded deal. The 2003 designation of former RCD-G leader Z'ahidi Ngoma instead of the long-time opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi as vice-president of the transitional government, representing Congo's unarmed opposition, led the UDPS to express fierce objections to the agreement, which two of its representatives signed with reservations. The UDPS consequently boycotted the transitional institutions and the first post-war elections in 2006.

After being criticized for this boycott, which was inspired by UDPS suspicions that the 2006 ballot was being rigged in favour of Kabila, the UDPS was singled out by many international observers and accused of obstructing the country's democratization process. This international positioning indirectly sent the message that, in a country where nobody expected elections to be

fair and transparent but where they have been a symbol and cornerstone of the internationally supported democratization and peacebuilding process, democratic credibility (and therefore democratic credentials) was not determined by elections in the first place. Rather, it was suggested that such credibility depended on participation in and contribution to the political competition through an ad hoc platform, i.e. a political party, regardless of whom this participation benefitted.

International criticism of the UDPS did not do justice to the contribution of the party's struggle to democratization in the DRC. Yet, to explain the Tshisekedi regime's logic, it is worth looking back at the lessons learnt by the party from decades of opposition. Congo's transition to a multi-party system is partly informed by the fight of the UDPS against Mobutu's single party rule. Created in 1982, the party was long denied legal recognition by Mobutu's regime. Things started to change in 1990, when Mobutu announced a democratization process. Prior to this process, Mobutu was well-versed in a strategy of divide and conquer, which he employed extensively to undermine the UDPS, his main political opponent. It included the recruitment of party officials and the incitement of ethno-regional discrimination and violence to transform the party into an "ethnic party". Once it was agreed that the transitional government would be elected by the Conférence Nationale Souveraine (CNS), this new institution had to organize the transition towards democracy and involve representatives of political forces, civil society, and so on. But its instalment soon set in motion political competition between Mobutu's regime and the political opposition, by then existing of numerous political parties. The political challenge was to manage political representation within this assembly in order to influence the outcomes of the CNS. Many of the participating political parties were newly created following Mobutu's announcement of the transition, and the explosion in their number to some extent echoed the frustration caused by several years of single party rule. It was also triggered, however, by Mobutu's strategy to inundate the CNS with his supporters to counteract the opposition (in particular, the UDPS) in its attempts to prevent him from controlling the outcomes of the CNS.

Faced with this huge proliferation of political parties, UDPS leaders initiated and coordinated a common front of the radical opposition, which took the

name of Union Sacrée de l'opposition radicale (USOR) and brought together no fewer than 115 political parties. The aim was to guarantee sufficient representation for the UDPS and its supporters at the CNS and to build a strong opposition – a strategy which would later be repeated, for different reasons and in a different context, with the creation of Union Sacrée de la Nation (USN). The UDPS initially won that battle against Mobutu and Etienne Tshisekedi was elected prime minister. However, the newly elected government's power was nullified by Mobutu's strategies to divide (but also duplicate) and conquer, which succeeded in weakening the UDPS and the USOR from the inside.¹⁰

When UDPS representatives went to the Inter-Congolese Dialogue (DiC), in 2002, the party was (still) inspired by its assumed legitimacy as the main non-armed political force resulting from its pivotal position during Mobutu's democratization process and the election by the CNS of Tshisekedi as prime minister. The UDPS was still convinced that its opportunity to rule had been prevented, at least in part, by the absence of (international) support for the UDPS-led government during the pre-war democratization process. The DiC once again sidelined the UDPS and rewarded what the UDPS had fiercely opposed: the acquisition of power through armed force. UDPS leaders were not satisfied with the outcomes of the discussions and with the content of the AGI, and simply did not believe in it. As a result, Etienne Tshisekedi refused to sign the agreement.

Strategic aims such as the need of prospects for Tshisekedi (and the UDPS) to remain in power after the 2028 elections (the current constitution does not allow a third term) and to keep the cohesion of the USN intact can be considered as driving forces behind the aim to amend the constitution. The party's history presented above, however, provides additional elements to

¹⁰ Following a conclave convened by Mobutu at the Palais du Peuple, which undertook a transition programme parallel to the work of the CNS, the institutions of the state were eventually duplicated: from then onwards, there were two governments, one from the CNS led by Tshisekedi, the other from the Conclave organized by Mobutu, as well as two parliaments. In the absence of any external support, USOR was forced to negotiate with the institutions created by Mobutu. In 1994, the two parliaments merged into a High Council of the Republic-Transitional Parliament (HCR-PT), a formula that proved unsuitable for governing the country, yet which remained in place until the AFDL invasion in 1996.

explain why President Tshisekedi during a speech in Kisangani on 24 October 2024, announced his intention to amend the Constitution. The speech reinforced the belief among most observers that there appears to be a contradiction between the struggle of the UDPS for democratization and the way it has been exercising power. Yet it could be argued that it rather points to consistency in the party's trajectory. In his speech, Tshisekedi asserted that the Constitution had been drafted by foreigners in a foreign country and that it was hindering the fight against the M23. Analysts rightfully pointed out that this claim was not accurate. From the point of view of the UDPS, though, it reflects reality: from their perspective, the Constitution was the outcome of a peace agreement (the AGI) that the party never fully supported or embraced. The agreement, facilitated by Western actors, also marginalized the party and its non-violent struggle, prioritizing the inclusion of armed groups in power. That today's UDPS leaders want to make changes to a Constitution that was framed by an agreement with which they fundamentally disagreed, in which they did not believe, and that even marginalized them, is not inconsistent in light of the party's history.

Similarly, the way in which the same leaders managed the 2023 elections via the creation of the USN recalls the UDPS strategy at the time of the CNS to overthrow Mobutu via the creation of the USOR, as well as Kabila's strategies to retain power. While one might be surprised at Tshisekedi's reproduction of a system of inclusiveness already initiated by Mobutu, one might also wonder if those who have long represented the hidden cost of power-sharing now are outmanoeuvring the very system that had marginalized them. Although the political methods employed by the party today may not significantly contradict its previous opposition struggle, the question remains as to what political end these methods serve and whether this end aligns with the UDPS's historical fight.

Over 20 years since the Global and Inclusive Agreement, during which 910 political parties have been created, politics in the DRC seem to work as a function of one big inclusive agreement. Elections serve as a gateway for aspiring individuals to enter the field of power. To those already in positions of authority, elections function as both a ritual and an affirmation of their status within the power structure. Elections also offer leeway for the regime to include or exclude aspirants. For the selection of those being included and thus to be put in a position that allows their election, and in order to be to a minimum consistent with regional and international standards, the anchoring of the regime's associated political parties in society all over the territory is the true stake of winning elections. It indeed allows to control or at least manage their outcomes. In this sense, it could be argued that the DRC suffers from an uninhibited form of Robert Michels's iron law of the oligarchy: the effectiveness of any democratic system is constrained by the extent of democracy that exists within the organizations engaged in the political competition, which usually are political parties (Michels 1999).

Being included or excluded has become the only true line of division within Congo's political landscape. Beyond the polarization between a regime on the one hand and an opposition boycotting elections on the other, there is also opposition between those who have benefited from power-sharing agreements and those who have paid the price for them. Such opposition is reflected in the nominations since Tshisekedi took power. A key factor influencing access to a position in the president's campaign team and first-term administration was whether one had a shared history of political struggle

within the UDPS. In the selection of the inner circle, this shared experience of opposition proved to be more important than shared territorial or ethnic origins, which further complicates the widely accepted theory of “lubalization” (referring to the Luba ethnic community) of the current regime.

But inclusion works only as long as the regime manages to charm members of Parliament and small political parties, i.e. as long as political entrepreneurs perceive an interest in making alliances with the regime (based on the perception of a win-win outcome), or, to the contrary, as long as political parties are not institutionalized and solid enough to resist the regime's pressure and dominance. As shown in this report, all political parties that have successfully become institutionalized and emerged as competitors in the political arena share a history of holding positions of authority within state institutions and accessing state resources. This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle, where inclusiveness in the system undermines the regime's competitiveness.

This brings us back to our initial reflection on the interconnectedness of regime politics and the protracted conflict in eastern Congo. The opposition between those who have benefited the most from power-sharing and those who have paid its price is not only the result of interests but is reflected in terms of experience: the UDPS, until the signing of the AGI, never considered armed struggle to be a desirable vehicle for change; to the contrary, it led a non-violent struggle for democratization of Mobutu's regime in the 1990s, for which it received little support from outside. In contrast, the PPRD (indirectly) emerged from a regionally driven armed rebellion, which quickly overthrew Mobutu, and during a considerable part of its time in power could count on the support of international donors, until it became more and more isolated, partly because of the intend the modify the constitution and run for a third term. This helps to explain that Tshisekedi's stand against the inclusion of armed actors such as the M23 in the FARDC or in Congo's political institutions is a matter of political credibility and survival.

To conclude, failing to acknowledge the subtle yet significant changes to the political system in the DRC since Tshisekedi's arrival in power reflects a reductionist bias. It also perpetuates a normative interpretation of politics still informed by the flawed assumption of the AGI that inclusion, peace,

democratization, elections are analogous. The politicization of the war in eastern Congo in the 2023 elections through strong nationalistic rhetoric and the (costly) assertion of sovereignty raises the concern that rather than equating peace with elections, inclusive agreements might well have intertwined war politics with electoral politics.

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