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WEBINAR

ASSESSING THE DRC'S HIGH-STAKES PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTIONS AMID UNCERTAINTY

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O'HANLON: Greetings everyone, and happy holidays. I'm Mike O'Hanlon with the Foreign Policy program and the Africa Security Initiative at Brookings. I'm just thrilled today to be joined by an outstanding group of Congolese and Congo scholars to talk about big events this week in the Democratic Republic of Congo, notably a presidential election, along with other elections. But this would be the effort by President Tshisekedi to seek a second term in office after his first victory was in some quarters appreciated for at least representing a peaceful transition of power, but in other quarters seen as an inaccurate reflection of the actual will of the Congolese people.

In any event, since that time, Congo has moved along and there are some hopeful signs in this amazing, huge country of more than 100 million in the heart of Africa, very well endowed with so many resources, including many that are central to the electric vehicle industry and other parts in the cell phone industry, other parts of modern technology and global manufacturing. But at the same time, Congo remains troubled by violence in the east, remains troubled by a weak administrative and management system, high levels of corruption and some political violence, although certainly not nearly as bad as in some parts of its past and not as bad as in certain other countries.

So let me briefly introduce our outstanding panelists today, and then we're going to proceed as follows. We will have an opening round of questions and responses that will just sort of take stock of how is Congo doing? I don't want to presume here that everyone's an expert on Congo and that everyone's been following week to week or even year to year development. So sort of if we take stock of Congo in the context of the conclusion of President Tshisekedi's first term in office and now a country 60 plus years independent, 30 years or so since the fall of Mobutu almost, anyway, how do, how do things look in broad historical sweep? And then secondly, what should we understand and focus on for the elections, which are only a little more than 24 hours away now in Congo itself? And then finally, what should the international response be depending on how the elections proceed, but also based on where we stand in this broader sweep of history? So, Jason Stearns is the author of excellent books on Congo, "Dancing in the Glory of Monsters," as well as "The War that Doesn't Say Its Name." He speaks to us from Goma, Goma, in eastern Congo right now, where Fred Bauma also is located. And they both work with the Congo Research Group at NYU, New York University, Center on International Cooperation. Jason is also a professor in western Canada. So at least the fact that he's on site means we're not waking him up early for this discussion, but we're very grateful that he is joining us again, just as he did in our previous event back in the summer. Fred Bauma, as I mentioned, is Congolese, who has demonstrated and exemplified courage and commitment to human rights and to the promotion of democracy in his home country, suffering imprisonment and even severe threats and physical harm and danger. Through the process of his commitment to his country's advancement, he is now, as I mentioned, part of the NYU Center on International Cooperation. He also is involved in various groups, sort of African diasporas and African communities of activists and pro-democracy individuals who are working throughout the continent to try to promote the idea of better human rights and better democracy in a continent where, for all the troubles, there have been important steps forward, certainly since the time that I was a Peace Corps volunteer in DRC 40 years ago. And then finally Joseph Mulala Nguramo is a scholar at the Scowcroft Center here in Washington. But he is also Congolese. He is also from the east by background, and he is also the first Congolese ever to graduate from West Point, the U.S. military academy here in the United States. And he's been a passionate, passionate advocate for his country's best interests in the years I've known him in Washington.

So, gentlemen, thank you all for joining us. And Jason, if I could begin with you. And again, this big picture question. You've been working in Congo and on Congo for a long time. Just how does this historical moment strike you? How how is Congo doing in the broad sweep before we get into the specifics of the elections?

STEARNS: Well, I think there's many ways of answering that question. The Congo, on the one hand, is and you can see this from investors, it is a darling of the investors in terms of foreign direct investment at the moment. The economy is growing, I think is projected to grow by 7% next year. Its budget, its revenues have grown under Tshisekedi, depending on how you see the figures between two- or three-fold in the last five years. You can see some of that, although I think not very much of it in terms of infrastructure and in terms of, in terms of especially high-profit sectors such as mining and banking and telecommunications.

So it's a country that's extremely vibrant. It has a very vibrant civil society, as always, and and youth. And we've seen some of that in the election campaign. But it's also a very troubled country. We have 7 million people displaced in eastern Congo. That makes it the worst, if not, I think it's still either the worst or the second-worst IDP crisis in the world. That's more people than have ever been displaced at any previous point in time in Congolese history. There are 100 armed groups. There are, I think, in many parts of the east here where I'm speaking to you from, the daily lives of people are threatened constantly by both the state security services as well as other security services. We've seen an escalation in violence in the last few years. And due to regional armed groups, you have far up to the north, you have an Islamist armed group called the ADF that is made itself known due to its extreme brutality in massacres. And then right on the outskirts of Goma here you have the M23 armed group that's backed by the Rwandan government.

And so, you know, there's many ways of answering that question. But I think that unfortunately, as much as there have been some progress in certain areas, that progress is largely limited to a very small elite of people. Like Goma, for example, in many ways is much better developed than it was a few years ago. But just head to the outskirts of Goma and you'll see the Kanyaruchinya IDP camps where you have tens of thousands of people, probably hundreds of thousands of people camped out, eating once a day, getting sick, and many of them dying from preventable diseases. MSF estimated that over 10,000 women were raped in just one part of the east here over the past year. And so I think that there are many criteria, there's just not enough being done. And mostly, mostly I would say it's being completely ignored by the broader international community.

O'HANLON: Thank you for a very helpful framing. And Fred, if I could go to you with the same question, How do you see things as this broad sweep of history unfolds?

BAUMA: Thank you. Thank you very much, Michael. I think there's little to add in terms of history to what Jason just, just mentioned. In regard to this election and how it can impact I think the past dynamic, conflicts in eastern DRC, and I am speaking from someone, as someone who didn't grow up in the east, I think would be the main challenge of this election. People in eastern DRC are expecting that this election will lead somehow to some resolution of conflict. As Jason was saying, we have now around Goma and in the east you are seeing more IDPs than ever before. But it's also an interesting moment because during the five, the last five years of Tshisekedi, I think he has been able to raise more money than any time before, in terms of the national budgets and expenditure. But of course that, those, those expenditures are still limited to the smaller details in Kinshasa. So this is a country that has been suffering from conflict for a really long time and growing

inequality. And at the eve of the election, there's a lot of expectations of how to resolve that cycle of conflict and how to create conditions for shared prosperity in DRC given its paradox of a rich country dealing with a lot of misery.

O'HANLON: Thank you. Before I go to Joseph, could I do one follow up? Because I wanted to ask you, since you're in Goma right now, both you and Jason, what is the state of the U.N. mission? As I understand it, the mandate for the U.N. peacekeeping mission in eastern Congo is due to expire in a year. But now there's a debate about whether it should leave even sooner. President Tsisekedi has taken it on, blamed it for inability to solve the security crises in the region. Obviously, it has struggled, because it's 25 years into this and the east remains very, very troubled and and violent and chaotic, as you've both been explaining. But what's the specific state of the U.N. peacekeeping mission situation?

BAUMA: So, the U.N. mission, the massive presence of U.N. mission in DRC remains between the two regions of Kivu and South Kivu, so the provinces of the east, and the most affected by conflict. But in many of those places, the U.N. is, has become very unpopular. And if you take example of Goma, for example, where there is one of the big logistical bases used by the massive presence of the U.N. You can barely see the U.N. vehicles with the U.N. medals on their car. Since the last demonstration, the U.N. had been almost forced to remove all the indication of the U.N. on their cars. That shows you how [inaudible] environment they are involved in. But at the same time, there is a growing insecurity and the Congolese government has been, has shown little capacity to resolve, to resolve conflicts. Sometime, sometime like recently, MONUSCO committed to protect Goma and deployed some some of their troops around Goma, but still it remains very unpopular. And the other thing that has been useful for during this election especially was to assist the Congolese government in deployment, deployment of electoral materials in some of the provinces, in some cities around eastern DRC, and I think the government was asking the U.N. Security Council to allow MONUSCO to do that even in the provinces where they are not present. So you have a mission that's been here for 25 years plus that has become so unpopular among the population. That is also become a tension, for governments, officials, everyone, at least in their discourse, wants MONUSCO to leave, but at the same time, you have logistical and and security concerns that may may indicate that is probably not the moment to have a large vacuum, security vacuum. But yeah, it's a challenging situation.

O'HANLON: That's very helpful. Joseph, I've known you for about a decade and I've always been struck by your unyielding optimism about your country. And yet at the same time, you're always very fair-minded, seeing a lot of problems, being critical of your, you know, government or society's response to some, but supportive of the response to others. You you're very pragmatic and very evenhanded. So how would you take stock of where Congo is today?

NGURAMO: Thank you, Mike. First of all, I'd like to say thanks to Jason and Fred for what they are doing. They're very brave, you know, very, very brave. It's felt to the work that I think all of us we stay well-informed for what has happened on the ground. So guys, I really thank you for what you are doing. Well, quite frankly, for the, I think today's I think the country, the Congolese people, they have a great opportunity to decide their future. If anything, a lot will to go into the detail of what Jason and Fred have already mentioned because I think highlights one of the major issues of the country. But how do we moving forward from here? I think the credibility of the election next Wednesday is very, very important. Because if you look at the history of this country, particularly the last elections, every time there is probably the [inaudible] of elections, the sitting president getting

entangled into problems with how to govern the country. So I think it will be very, very important that these elections are so credible and transparent. We really know exactly after who won the elections so that we can really focus on problem of the East, such as solving the instability in the east end of the DRC and of course, focus on socio-economic problems. So that would be really kind of my two cents about the [inaudible].

O'HANLON: Okay, great. So thank you. And now let's get into the elections themselves. There are a few questions on my mind, and I'm just going to put them all on the table and ask you each to speak to whichever you find most interesting or important. First of all, I think it's it's essential for generalists to understand who's running. Obviously, President Tshisekedi is one of the candidates, and in the previous election, he was thought by independent monitors like the Carter Center or the Catholic Church in Congo, perhaps to have received 20% of the vote. Mr. Fayulu, I think, received 60%, but was -- at least according to some of these independent assessments -- but was not recognized as the winner. And so President Tshisekedi was seen as this sort of compromise that people could settle on. But who else is running now and who's the favorite? And do you think the process so far has been reasonably fair? We had an event with Mr. Fayulu in August, as you'll recall, and he was talking about his concerns with voter registration and how it wasn't clear that everybody who wanted to vote and was eligible to vote would be allowed to vote. I don't know if that really was the crux of the main challenge facing Congo and how well that's been addressed in the four months since. So, the issue of voter registration, the safety of voters as they go to the polls, the integrity of the vote count process, as you see that shaping up. The role of independent outside monitors, as well as the official Congolese commission, the CENI commission, as well as groups like the Carter Center and the Catholic Church in Congo and their role in this election. So let me just put all that on the table and ask you what you'll be watching for this week. And maybe we'll go in reverse order this time, please, and start with Joeseph.

NGURAMO: Yeah, absolutely. So it's really, I think, critically important that we have fair elections next Wednesday. I think by having credible elections, we finally have a legitimate government which is very, very important. That will finally, I think, focus on, you know, governing the country effectively, to the levers of economic issues, you know, as Fred mentions, and Jason, this country has so much, so much potential in terms of natural wealth, but yet very poor, young people have no jobs and educations. So I like to think that a legitimate government will have more room of maneuver to actually focus on those problems. At the same time, I'd like to say as well, regional countries should really see that as well as actually in their interest, because having a legitimate government or a government that's people are kind of in no doubt that's well, you know, it was not elected by the people, it's actually perpetrated the problem. So it's not only the DRC, but also the regional countries, as well, the international community, particularly United States. So, you know, we you know, with investments that we know [inaudible] but in terms of foreign aid. So I think we all have a stake to make sure that the next Wednesday elections are actually credible and transparent.

O'HANLON: Thank you. And Fred, over to you. What you'll be watching for, who you think might win, whether you think the outcome is likely to be fair. All those questions to you, please, my friend.

BAUMA: Let's say there was 26 candidates to begin with. And I think with the dynamic of elections, that there's three or four who are standing up: the incumbent, Tshisekedi, with all the state's apparatus who is showing to be one of the probably front-runner for this election. And then you have Moïse Katumbi who is also popular, and Martin Fayulu, and

today, 2018 Nobel Prize Denis Mukwege who is also running. It's very hard to say, I mean, I think we can't say that this process has been free and fair. There was a lot of limitation. We, throughout the way, there was a lot of question on the voter registry, there is a, there's a question on how many people would be able to cast their vote on the Election Day due to logistical, potential logistical challenges. Also challenges around the electoral card that so many people have and with all the indication where all the attention is [inaudible]. There was, there is a question of political control of many of the key electoral institutions. CENI itself, but also the constitutional courts and and the the security services which are under the control of the regime. So all these make it feel like it hasn't been a fair process, although I think in terms of who may be, there may be a clear winner after all, after this election, I won't go and say who will be the winner, but we'll know in two days. For me, two things to watch will be -- [inaudible] -- two things to watch would be the the potential risk of violence, communal violence during this election. One of the key topics of the electoral campaign was identity. And that is a very standard question, both in eastern DRC but also in the provinces like Katanga. So how how will the winner or the losers react? A few days ago a group of like the former head of the electoral commission, together with some other people, decided, like announced that they will launch a political military group, I guess a sort of rebellion. How serious that would be and how the outcome of the election would influence that, there's a general concern on how this initiative will affect the security then, I mean, in DRC general, in eastern DRC, [inaudible]. That's something to continue to watch as we are approaching the elections.

O'HANLON: Thank you. And Jason, same question to you, please. What will you be watching for? What do you expect? How hopeful are you for this week to go well?

STEARNS: Well, I'm probably going to repeat a lot of what Fred just said. I think that the, he talked about the presidential election, which, of course, everybody's watching that; power is concentrated in the presidency. But this, at least constitutionally, it's a semi-presidential system. There are 25,000 candidates in the legislative elections, 44,000 candidates in the provincial legislative elections. And there are over 70 different political parties and political groupings, as they're called here, that are vying in these elections. So it's an extremely fragmented picture, and I think that's a problem. Power ends up being extremely fragmented, and then the government ends up herding cats to try to get the votes and try to get the political will and the clout to pass, gets things through. But I do think that legislative elections are extremely important as well. And I think whereas there is a clear favorite in the presidential election, maybe, maybe I'll just say it, since Fred didn't want to say it, Felix Tshisekedi is the is a clear favorite, I think, just for a variety of reasons. I think there's been some polling that suggests this. But he is also in control of the state apparatus. The opposition is relatively fragmented. They tried to get together on a common platform and they failed. It's been very difficult for the opposition, up until the election campaign, which has actually been relatively, I would say, free and fair with some pretty serious incidents, though, it was actually very difficult for some of the main opposition candidates to to travel around the country. And so for a variety of reasons, Tshisekedi is is the favorite. But even if he if he does win, I think that legislative elections are a different story. Many people are dissatisfied; again, if you look at polling, many people are dissatisfied with the people they voted for last time around. You could very well see, I think, a sea change in terms of at least the characters, the cast of characters at the national and the provincial assemblies. And so that, you know, again, that's probably still going to gravitate around the presidency and he's going to be able to stitch together a coalition. But there'll be some change there. I'll look at that. Like Fred, I'm particularly interested in seeing what the outcome of this is going to be, what the reaction of the candidates will be. What you can see now, is there is an ultra nationalist tinge that is being

developed in the election campaign, which is not surprising in the Congo, but somewhat concerning. What I mean by that is that increasingly, if you see the candidates going around the country, they're trying to outdo each other with how much they blame Rwanda for the problems in the East and how militaristic their rhetoric is. When Katumbi came here, for example, he said, well, Tshisekedi's going after the rebels with Sukhois - they have these old Russian jets - but if I'm a president, I'll buy some western F-16s, I'm going to bomb them. So it's a, it's a, they're trying to really outdo each other in terms of the militarism, which is, I mean, there is no purely militaristic solution to this. So it's it's a bit disconcerting. But I think also what you see is increasingly a doubling down on a kind of a nationalism that's tinged with xenophobia. So there's been a lot of talk about how Katumbi, who is probably the major competitor, main competitor of Tshisekedi, is actually not Congolese. How he's Zambian, has a Zambian passport, how his mother is his wife is a Burundian Tutsi, how he's actually allied to the Rwandan government. There's been a lot of this sort of talk, and I think that's, I think that actually, unfortunately has been relatively successful for Tshisekedi, but it's worse nonetheless. The question then is what happens after the elections? To what degree will people accept the results of all of these elections? How, I think, as Fred said, there's a lot of problems with the electoral process, from voter registration to the audit of the voting registry, to the politicization of not only the election commission but the court system. So there are a lot of problems with the electoral process. Will the vote be seen as legitimate enough by the Congolese people so that we can move on? Will it be seen as legitimate enough by international players? I think these are all important questions. And will the main opposition challengers, will they, you know, will they, will they accept the vote? But I think, you know, which you can see, one of the things, one of the trends - and this will be interesting to people in the D.C. area - seeing as that there's been a bit of a sea change in U.S. policy in recent years with regards to the DRC, especially when it comes to DRC-Rwanda. The current people working on foreign policy in central Africa in State, in the White House are much, much more critical of Rwanda than in the past, which is, I think, welcome in the sense that Rwanda is playing a destabilizing role. They have foreign military units in the eastern Congo. They're a key part of the destabilization. So that's good. But one of the reasons they're doing this is, I think what - there are I think certainly people in the administration who are doing this for the right reason, but there's no denying, as I think you hinted to, hinted at, Mike, that the Congo is just a more important place now because of the minerals, because of the showdown with China, because it's the largest copper producer in Africa, it's the largest cobalt producer in the world. It's a key producer of other minerals as well, and that's important to the United States. And so the reason I bring that up here is because if you speak with people in the U.S. administration and you ask them what will happen if the elections, you know, seem to be relatively fraudulent, will the U.S. actually, would it play, would step in? And my feeling is they probably will not, in part because they want to be close with whatever administration comes in. And so that rising economic importance has both, I think, positive as well as negative side effects. The last thing I want to say, and I'm going on for fairly long, but the last thing I want to say is a very local thing. Sitting here in Goma, there are several places in the Congo, including three territories just outside of Goma, probably, I think, about a million voters, who have been disenfranchised because of the violence. They won't vote. It's the territories of Nyiragongo, Rutshuru, and Masisi. That is going to be problematic, not just because they won't be able to vote, and that's bad for them, but also because it's going to, what it's going to do is, it's going to produce, that those are places home to particular ethnic communities will not be represented. Probably, it's not clear what people are going to do, but may not be represented at the national level, at the provincial level, and that could have repercussions as well. So there's some risks that, there's risks that violence is created, but they can also create more violence here in the eastern Congo due to elections.

O'HANLON: Thank you. That was an excellent take on where we stand. I wanted to follow up on President Tshisekedi briefly before I get back to international policy options going forward. And you mentioned, Jason, that he seems to be the favorite. Is that because he's the incumbent, essentially, and incumbents in general have advantages of name recognition or he's played this Rwanda card correctly or effectively, even if it wasn't necessarily always accurately? Or is it because Congolese feel like things have actually started to move at least somewhat in the right direction for them? Not in the east, but in general? So that's my question for each of you.

STEARNS: Should I, should I start, Mike? Yeah. Yeah. I think I mean, I think the answer is we don't know entirely. We can speculate. We don't have, we haven't, I don't think there's been enough polling or surveys done of Congolese really, to have an answer to that question. It's a good question. I think he's less popular in the East than in the rest of the country, precisely because of the the awful violence here. And very little has changed since - he came to power with the promise to bring peace, and that certainly hasn't happened. And so people here, I think, are fairly critical of him. What has he been able to do? What's his legacy? Well, you know, let's see what let's see what he's saying. He talks a lot about being able to grow the economy. That's true. A lot of that has to do also with trends in the mining industry, the price of copper and cobalt, but also just the fact that the way the mining industry is structured, a lot of big mining projects happened to come online in recent years. And so he benefits. I mean, so much of government revenue comes from mining, so he benefited enormously from that. He has been more aggressive in revenue gathering. But at the same time, what you have is you have a much larger government spending that money often on things that don't benefit the people. So the presidency has become huge. You have a half a billion dollars, I believe, now spent on the presidency alone, even though the presidency is not actually the head of government, it's the head of state. Right. And so there's, I think, some warranted criticism about the spending of the government. But he certainly has increased the amount of money that there is. I mean, ordinary people care about that if they can't see it in their pockets. At the moment, you actually have quite bad inflation in the Congo. People are feeling the pinch. And so I'm not sure the economy is actually a really persuasive thing for for many Congolese. Is, his flagship, I think, initiative is free primary education, which he did push through, which did end up putting several million more Congolese into primary schools. It was a chaotic process. It was contested, especially by the Catholic Church, which is one of the main providers of active education in the DRC. But I think that many people do feel that he did something that hadn't been done before. He's promised now free, free maternal health care, free secondary education. Maybe these promises mean things to people. There's been some infrastructure development, I think, although relatively little given the enormous needs. Certainly, airplane, you know, air traffic hasn't gotten much better. There's been some developments in some of the major cities. Goma, for example, has much better roads than it used to, but that is actually not mostly because of the central government. It's, those are local and donor driven initiatives. And so I think what I'm trying to tell you, Mike, is I don't really know. Yeah, he's he's the favorite. I think that many people do see him as probably the person that they would vote for. I would not be surprised if if he won a free and fair election, but I'm not entirely sure. I would love to hear Fred's Fred's answer on that question. And yes, of course, he does control the apparatus of the state. He controls the state-run media. He controls the security services. That has been an advantage. That has been an advantage. I don't think it's been a crushing advantage to him. You don't see them shutting down systematically opposition rallies and presence and demonstrations, although that definitely has also happened. But but that's

definitely been been an advantage. But I'd love to hear what Fred had, Fred in the in the room two meters to my left over here would have to say about that.

O'HANLON: So Fred and then Joseph, same question, please. I think you're still on mute, my friend.

BAUMA: Yeah, my, my, my microphone was muted. Well, so going on on some of the the key challenges of his mandate, I think he hasn't done very well, although in the same reasonshe seems to be quite popular. Like if you look at, let's, if you look at Goma, for example, itself, the security in the city has grown tremendously during the past five years. There is [inaudible]. There's a number of displaced people. And yet, when we go in this region, Goma people, many people have may, may end up voting for Tshisekedi. I feel like in some places, the nationalistic discourse and the toughness on Rwanda especially, is one of the key reasons why people are maybe aligned behind him. And if you see the narrative on the campaign, actually, in the east, most of it was was was on Rwanda, right, rather than the key and sound policies that may end conflict in the region. Rwanda, or the identity of the wife of the candidates, things like that. I also think the free education, pre-primary edition, has an impact. Although there is a debate on whether it's also, there is also an increase in terms of quality of education. Actually, many people think that many people have access to school, but the quality of education actually was affected negatively by that choice. But still, it's something that people mention very often when they talk about Tshisekedi and why, why [inaudible] voting for him. In general, I have to say this, this campaign hasn't been about like, the difference as it being in terms of policy proposals on the key challenges of the country. This has been a very populistic campaign on the on on different, different, different side. And that is appealing to a certain level of population. And if you see even in Kinshasa where clearly the local government is trying in many ways, the, the center of the city is become very rich, but the rest of the city has grown super poor. People are still appealed to the nationalistic discourse in attracting people. So I won't, I won't say why he, he may be different, but it's definitely not because he is proposing something new or something different or something sound in terms of what are the challenges of his government in the next year.

STEARNS: If I could just add something, Mike, just very briefly. Yeah. I mean, we did some polling in back in January, now. It was striking; tshisekedi was the clear frontrunner back then, but people were also extremely unhappy with him. And so it's not, it's sort of by default that you look at the people running against him. Katumbi was somebody who was a governor under Kabil, was very close to the Kabil government. I think that there's some distrust there as well. There's a certain, I think, a feeling that -- I was talking to somebody here in Goma the other day -- they're all the same. And so there may be that they'll vote for Tshisekedi, but it may not be out of, it's not extreme enthusiasm or passion, it's just maybe he's the best of a bunch of not so great choices.

O'HANLON: By the way, do you recall, not exactly, but the rough numbers that you're talking about? I mean, is Tshisekedi ahead by like 30 to 10, or is it 90 to 10, or is it closer than that?

STEARNS: So the polling that we did back in February and there's been some -- we're going to release some polling figures tonight actually that are not too different -- shows that there is a tremendous gap between, suggests at least that there's a tremendous gap, and there's been some other polling that's similar. So we're talking about 50 to 25.

O'HANLON: Got it.

STEARNS: So, yes, it's it's a large, it's a large gap.

O'HANLON: Right. And I assume that means that, well, we don't want to get ahead of ourselves, the elections need to play out. But this may reduce the probability of a candidate who loses crying foul that somehow the state apparatus was rigged against him or her. Because if the polls typically indicate this kind of an advantage, then it won't be a huge surprise to most people if President Tshisekedi wins. Let me let me not make that point too firmly since the voters get to decide, not me here or all of us today. But Joseph, over to you for your explanation about how President Tshisekedi has been seen and why he may be the front runner, if you agree with that assessment.

NGURAMO: Here I think Fred and Jason have really brought up some really good points. For example, the free education was maybe poorly executed, for example. I think the the view that Tshisekedi seemed to have taken some kind of a very strong anti-Rwanda position, which is really, I think, easy to sell in Congolese opinion along those lines. But at the same time, I think some really serious concerns that during Tshisekedi's terms, for example, the corruption that would happen around him. You know, the you know, cases of hundred million dollars that have been stolen by his entourage. And certainly the men just really failed to hit really hard with those kind of issues.

Anyway, at this point, like in my humble opinion, the way I see things run at this level, it's just critical people really know exactly who win the elections, who won the election next Wednesday. And to come back to one of the question you ask here, my biggest fear is we get to the end of the elections and all three frontrunners, basically Tshisekedi, Moïse, and Martin, everyone said, I won the elections, okay. And then we have a serious problem. So the only way to dissociate that situation from getting some kind of a serious political crisis, we've got to know exactly what the truth. If the election, if Tshisekedi won, fine. As a matter of fact, saying that Tshisekedi will see that it is good for him. I mean, he's a legitimately elected president. At the same time I like to think that the the opposition members, Katumbi and Fayulu will absolutely accept the result, you know, and spare the country some trouble. So at this point, quite frankly, the way I'll say it is, we are getting a situation where we don't know if exactly who won the elections, we'll have a very serious problem. Very serious problem. So I hope we we we do everything we can, you know, from the United States, key allies, even the regional countries to really say that it's really critically important we know exactly who actually won the election. If it's Tshisekedi, great, congratulations and the opposition, Fayulu and Governor Katumbi, they'llabsolutely accept the result. If it's Katumbi who won or if it's Fayulu who won the election, the same way. So we need a bit of fair play in this process. So at least we're going to spare the country from a lot of trouble.

O'HANLON: Thank you. And I also want to thank the viewers who have written in with questions. And I've been trying to weave those into my questions, and I'll continue to do that now with this final main question. I may have a couple of small follow ups, but the big question, and Joseph, you alluded to the possibility of an election process or a vote count that goes badly in the next few days. I hope and pray, of course, that's not the case, just as you said. But let's let's imagine we have a clean winner in a week. But Congo still has all the same problems that it's got today. What role should the international community play at this juncture in coming into 2024 to try to help Congo get to the next level of success for its own people, peace and prosperity for its own people?

And my sense of how the international community has interacted with Congo over the years, picking up a little bit on what Jason said a few minutes ago, but also based on previous events we've done at Brookings and just following the debate, the United States for a while was primarily interested in security in the east not blowing up. And of course, that, we haven't been very successful in that regard. But there's been the effort to deploy a U.N. force and and so forth. And the United States has been interested in working the corruption question a bit and using sanctions against certain individuals or denial of visas or what have you to try to pressure greater transparency, especially with some of the mineral extraction. So that's been a big set of priorities for the United States as well as other Western donors like your home country, Canada, Jason. And then finally, on top of that, of course, as the Kabila presidency became so ensconced and started to look as if it could become a quasi-autocracy, a big priority last time was just to make sure there was an election that did not put him back in power. And so in that very limited sense, there was at least perhaps a small victory from the Western perspective. So to me, those have been the main priorities that I've seen the West trying to promote. And then, you know, occasional smaller efforts at development initiatives like on power or certain other priorities going back to President Bush and PEPFAR, things like that. So there have been some development efforts along the way as well.

So if that's the context and that's the history, are there any new ideas, new policies we should be considering, especially with the expected departure of the U.N. peacekeeping mission over the next few months? So if I could pose that question and maybe again, Jason, if I could start with you and then go to Fred and Joseph, please.

STEARNS: So I think I want to talk about the east, since that's where I'm speaking to you from, and I think that's the most burning need. As I said, there's 7 million people displaced here. I mean, it's really hard. It's hard to make people understand that just because it's not trench warfare, with, fought between modern armies, that a dead person is still a dead person. And there's people dying on a very large scale here, often far away from cameras, often due to preventable diseases, but diseases that are consequences of the humanitarian catastrophe here. And so there is very, very little focus on that.

And I think that what you need really is a peace process. We haven't had a peace process pretty much since the end of the the great Congo Wars in 2006. We've been living in a fiction of being in a post-conflict stabilization process. But there has been no comprehensive engagement with armed groups. There's been no truth and reconciliation process. There's no education process. There's been no real work, working demobilization process, and there's been no army reform process. It just goes down the lists of things that are necessary. There's been no, there's been no strategy. It's been a lot of ad hoc-ery. And that's very, that's deeply --

So, I think the very first thing you need is you need a framework, you need a process, you need a strategy. That, of course, is incumbent upon the Congolese government. But international actors are going to have to be, I mean, they got, they, they were, one of the, many of them were part of the reasons that we got into this mess in the first place, going way back in some cases. So I think that's that's key. I think within that strategy, there needs to be a special place for the M23 armed group. You know, we are living in a period of outstanding hypocrisy at the moment. The Rwandan army, I've I've seen videos, it's very clear. They have formed military units, hundreds and hundreds of Rwandan soldiers that are on camera. We have drones that are surveilling them. You can see them enter the border and formed units go and fights. It's a country that is invading another country. There's no doubt about that. And as I said, you go north of town here and you see people

in the worst, most squalid, pitiful conditions possible, because in large part of this. And there really is no excuse for it.

And the U.S. to give it credit has been the international, has been the player on the international scene that is, that has called the Rwandans out the most. They haven't done a whole lot about it other than suspending a very small military program and shaking a finger. One of the reasons for that is that they feel isolated. The Brits have not even condemned it. They held the world's commonwealth summit in the midst of the conflagration here in the eastern Congo with prince, now king, King Charles flying to Kigali. And the reason for that is not only traditional sort of strong ties between two governments, but is, I think, a fairly outrageous refugee asylum deal that the UK government has struck with the Rwandan government to basically deport or have the Rwandan or outsource the treatment of asylum seekers to the UK by sending them to Rwanda, a country with a very spurious human rights record. But because of that, not only is that deal, I think somewhat questionable, but because of that, they haven't spoken out on these massive human rights violations that the Rwandan government is--. And so in the midst of this huge conflagration, Paul Kagame is flying around the world, being feted at different fora by and hosted by a variety of different countries. The French government has been very reluctant to call them out because they are partners with the Rwandans, notably in security in northern Mozambique, where you have important French interests, notably oil interests, and the Rwandan army has sent soldiers there to, amongst other things, protect French oil installations from Islamist insurgency. And I could go down the list. And so I think that as much as people are hemming and hawing about how awful it is in the eastern Congo, at the same time they're funding, they've spent, doing the funding and courting and giving their stamp of diplomatic approval on a neighboring country that is is not the only destabilizing, because many things destabilizing the eastern Congo, but it's one of the major destabilizers in eastern Congo. So I think that there is a place, that's a place where there is I mean, there's many parts of the Congo that are hard to get leverage on. And where many of these changes are going to, are generational changes that have to do with governance and institutional reform. But that this right here is a place where you could have almost immediate effects if you had international diplomats actually care more. So I might stop there. There may be some questions, but I think that is very important for us to highlight just because we have such capacity to be able to make change there.

O'HANLON: Thank you, Jason. I want to make sure that I stay with you. That was very eloquent and I want to stay a little bit on the east and maybe Fred and and Joseph will also speak to this. But you mentioned on a list of things we have not previously done to have a good strategy for helping strengthen and reform the Congolese military. Is there an agenda there that you can imagine, or is that just inevitably an incremental process of trying to persuade the DRC to, you know, to promote better people and just gradually improve itself? Or is there a more fundamental way the United States and other Western countries could help that agenda?

STEARNS: Well, I mean, I'm glad you brought that up, because there's also been, I think, tremendous failing on the part of the Congolese authorities to create an army that actually cares for its people and to create and to care actually for its army. I mean, the highest ranking officer of the Congolese army makes \$150 a month. What's going to happen when you give that general a budget of 10 billion, \$10 million to manage. They're going to steal. You can't live off \$150 a month if you're a general. An MP in government in Kinshasa makes \$21,000 a month. And so just look at the difference there. I mean, it doesn't make any sense.

So I think there's been a lack of -- the reason for this in part is because it's in the interest, the Congolese government is extremely worried about the loyalty of its army. And it has, because of that, not only cracked down on rampant abuse, corruption, financial corruption, but also physical abuse in the Army. But it has kept the army in a place of indigence so that it can maintain loyalty by giving out basically bonuses to people to keep them personally loyal to the government in place. That's sort of how the army runs and what, you know, if you visit an army camp, it's usually a squalid place. It's a place, you know, we have stories here of soldiers killed on the front line. I was talking to a military intelligence officer in the Congolese army yesterday, and he was telling me and he was showing me footage of drone footage of Rwandans coming in. And one of the things he told me is like, you know, when my soldiers see that, of course they're angry that the Rwandans are doing this. But then we saw footage of Rwanda getting stuck and getting killed in the front lines, a soldier, and a whole section of the Rwandan army was dedicated to bringing that soldier over 100 miles back home so he got home. Right. Leave no one behind is the motto of the Rwandan army. And then he was saying, my soldiers watching this, they have to get their friends and family to raise money for their people killed on the front lines to give them a decent burial. Sometimes they're stuck in morgues for months, sometimes not even stuck in morgues. They're just buried on the front lines and never brought back. And so I think that, not really answering your question in a very, I think, analytical fashion, but it's an emotional issue, I think for many Congolese.

There needs to be I think, at the end of the day, greater will on the part of government officials in Kinshasa to take a risk and actually crack down on these patronage networks that riddle the army. To invest more. There needs to be more, much more money spent on improving the army, but also investing in accountability, financial accountability, but military justice as well, and holding the army -- so that's, that is the key ingredient here is greater accountability. And as I say here, the fish rots from the top. You need I think the only way that's going to happen in the short term is if you have visionary leadership.

O'HANLON: Fantastic. Thank you very much. Fred, I'd like to turn the same question to you about where, assuming a reasonably smooth election and vote count and transition either to a second term for President Tshisekedi or another president, what should the international community think about doing to help Congo on its path forward? And you can go wherever you like. But I also am intrigued by your potential perspective or personal perspective on the human rights issues, since you've been such an embodiment of the courage and the passion needed to advance that issue and that agenda. But whatever you like for the broad question of the agenda going forward for DRC.

BAUMA: Thank you, Michael. I guess the first human rights is the right to a decent life. And that is where many people here in the camps, not able to live in their house, are hoping for. So I will join Jason, they need to find a long-lasting solution to the crisis in eastern DRC. And some of them are not impossible to resolve. [Inaudible], which has focused a lot of attention today, is something that can be relatively easily dealt with, compared to groups like ADF and others. There's been a process, peace process in Nairobi and in Luanda, which I think have failed. I think the idea of Congo and the international community should try to be courageous and maybe create other spaces for talks like that. We are seeing during this election surging [inaudible] -- Literally seeing members of an armed group who are being distributed guns and that may pose a problem for peace and the future of democracy, security and distribution of firearms.

Now another thing to look at, of course, is the civic space. We, the last time, the last year, Tshisekedi has been very repressive in different ways, we still have someone like Stanis Bujakera who is probably one of the most well-known journalists who is in jail for almost nothing. People have been, political opponents have been killed. And the pre-election time was very repressive for civil society and opposition. I hope, and I think many countries should push their governments to be more open in that sense. Finally, I think there is a big risk that DRC become just a terrain for international, like the global competition between the US and Russia and the way some subjects are being prioritized over others. Current leaders, this focus on, for example, the Lobito Corridor. We have Angola, Zambia and DRC. I think part of that project should take into consideration governance and democracy issues in the region and not on the opportunity of trade and business. But creating, reinforcing, helping the Congolese government to create functional institutions in terms of administration, in terms of security, services, will actually benefit in the long run, the Congolese people, rather than just short term government cooperation that have failed for a very long time.

O'HANLON: Thank you very much. Excellent answer. And, Joseph, the last word is yours, my friend.

NGURAMO: Well, thank you, Mike. Anyway, first of all, thank you so much for doing this Mike, thank you for this opportunity to talk about it. I think Jason and Fred really kind of nailed it, especially with Jason's mentions. I would just maybe emphasize on that. I think particularly the United States, we have to be really, really serious, tough on holding this government accountable. Okay. It's just unacceptable that you have leaders who are just ripping their own country, their own people, and we are complacent about it. I like to think that including, of course, like international financial systems, that the World Bank and IMF, we've got to make sure that I think we hold these folks accountable. You know, we cannot tolerate so, you know, things that we see are not, quite frankly, supporting the Congolese people. About the DRC military, for example, which, by the way, Jason mentioned. I think one of the reasons why we've seen such a, you know, no improvement is because of impunity, you know, impunity in the Congolese military. So we've got to understand that part of that that's maybe the government doesn't want to address the issue directly. But I think, you know, it's what it takes. I mean, if you really need to make some progress and make a change, for example, the DRC military, we've got to make sure we hold people who are doing the bad stuff accountable, simple as that. Because if we don't, the system will keep just keep going and going. And I think this is what as well, the United States, of course, major donors of the DRC as well, they can really step in and try to help the situation. If we don't see reform in terms of quality governance, rule of law, fighting corruption, we have to really do everything we can to make sure that [inaudible]. That's my \$0.02. Yeah.

O'HANLON: Gentlemen, thank you very much. This has been very enlightening, certainly for me and I'm sure for many others around the world. Best wishes, those of you, Jason and Fred in Congo. Best wishes to the Congolese people on a big day for the country on Wednesday of this week. And going forward, certainly we wish you all happy holidays and wish the DRC a blessed and positive 2024. So again, on behalf of all of us at Brookings, thank you for joining us today. Very best wishes. Happy New Year.