



DR Congo

DR Congo: Introduction

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Chart 1: Political map of DR Congo

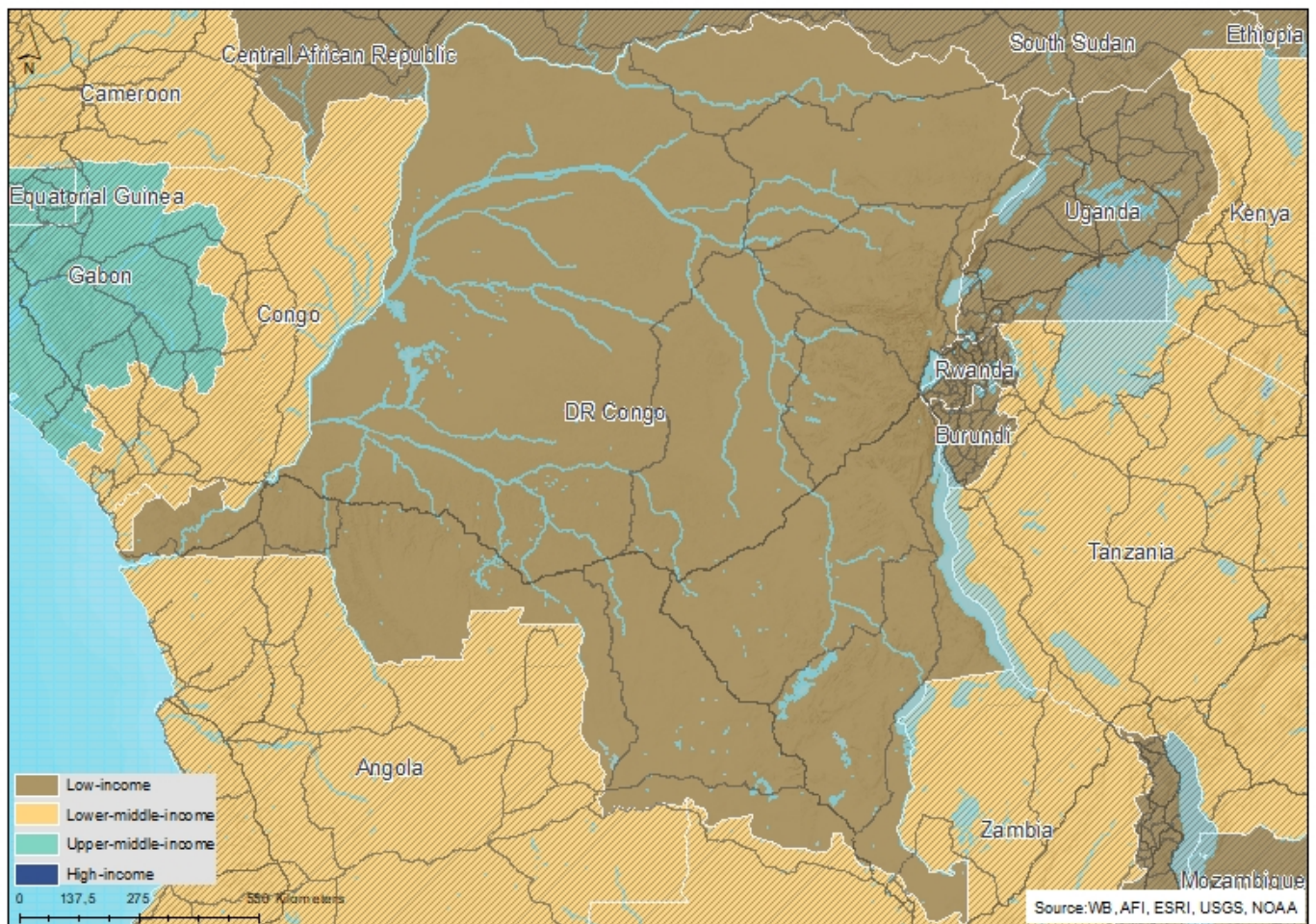


Chart 1 is a political map of DR Congo.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), also known as Congo-Kinshasa and formerly known as Zaïre, is located in Central Africa. The country is bordered to the north by the Central African Republic and South Sudan, to the east by Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania, to the south-east by Zambia, and to the south-west by Angola. To the west are DR Congo's short Atlantic coastline and the Angolan enclave of Cabinda and Congo (Brazzaville). Kinshasa is the largest and capital city of DR Congo.

DR Congo is the largest country by land area in sub-Saharan Africa, the second largest in Africa and the 11th largest in the world. Its land area covers approximately 2 344 858 km²—an area approximately the size of Western Europe. The country has the second-largest **tropical rainforest** (after Brazil) covering more than 992 000 km².

DR Congo is well known for its abundant and diverse mineral resources (mining is its largest industry), extensive navigable waterways, vast hydroelectric potential and arable land, estimated at 80 million hectares. The **country** possesses about 50% of the global cobalt reserves, 25% of the world's diamond reserves and large reserves of coltan. It is the largest producer of copper in Africa and the world's largest producer of cobalt.

Despite these abundant natural resources, the country remains among the poorest and least developed in Africa and the world. Most people in DR Congo have not benefited from this wealth. Since gaining its independence in 1960, DR Congo experienced social and political upheavals - conflicts, political instability, authoritarian rule and poor governance have impeded development progress and led to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the eastern part of the country.

The army mutinied one week after independence and the diamond-rich Kasai and copper-rich Katanga provinces attempted to secede^[1]. Eventually, United Nations and Congolese government forces managed to reconquer Kasai (in December 1961) and Katanga (in January 1963).

The first republic (1960-1965) was marked by armed conflicts, claiming nearly two million Congolese lives, and ended in a military coup led by Colonel Joseph-Désiré Mobutu on 24 November 1965. Mobutu declared himself president and was unopposed in the 1970 election.^[2]

He reversed the 1964 Luluabourg Constitution's federal structure, reducing the number of provinces to nine with limited autonomy. Despite efforts for greater regional autonomy,, including administrative decentralisation reforms in 1982, these were never implemented. Mobutu was eventually forced from power in 1997 having effectively mismanaged his country for more than three decades.^[3]

Economic reforms, driven by high copper prices, spurred growth in DR Congo from 1967 to 1973, but the oil crises of 1973 and 1979 and a drop in copper prices halted this expansion. The situation worsened with Mobutu's Zairianisation policy in 1973 (a form of indigenisation of the economy) which increased the involvement of the state in the economy.

These policies along with poor public financial management and wanton corruption led to hyperinflation, mounting debt, capital flight, increased poverty, and low agricultural production.^[4] By 1975, the country needed IMF help to manage its debt crisis.

From 1983 to 1989, DR Congo partnered with the IMF and the World Bank in a structural adjustment programme that briefly contributed to economic recovery. However, when external conditions improved, the government halted reforms, leading to a marked deterioration in financial performance.^[5]

The end of the Cold War in 1989 diminished DR Congo's strategic importance, triggering political instability, hyperinflation, currency depreciation and increased reliance on the United States dollar. The influx of 1.2 million Rwandese Hutus in 1994 due to the Rwandan genocide precipitated the 1996/97 war.

By 1996, Mobutu's international support had dwindled^[6] and the efforts by the IMF and the World Bank had failed.

In May 1997, Mobutu was driven from power by the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL), a coalition of rebel groups backed by Rwanda and Uganda. Laurent-Désiré Kabila proclaimed himself president, renaming the country from Zaïre to DR Congo. He inherited a dysfunctional country and attempted to carry out limited reforms, notably introduced a new currency, the Franc Congolais, and reduced the decentralised provinces to four.

However, disputes with former allies sparked the Great African War in August 1998, involving several neighboring states. The conflict ended in July 1999 with the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement, signed by DR Congo, Angola, Namibia, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, and the establishment of the UN Mission in DR Congo (MONUC).

MONUC's initial mandate was to observe the ceasefire and the disengagement of armed forces but its mandate was substantially expanded over time. The war reportedly killed millions, many of whom were children under the age of five.^[7]

In 2001, President Laurent-Désiré Kabila was assassinated and succeeded by his son, Joseph Kabila Kabange who re-engaged the international community, allowing MONUC to deploy across the country. In 2002, Congolese signed the Accord Global et Inclusif, leading to the 2003 Transition Constitution, a three-year transitional period, and the country's first free and fair elections in 2006, which Joseph Kabila won.

The Accord and Transition Constitution led to the drafting of a new Constitution, which incorporated contributions from a constituent assembly, provincial consultations, and both foreign and Congolese legal experts. Adopted by referendum in December 2005 and promulgated in February 2006, this Constitution set the stage for ongoing political and security challenges. The subsequent 2008 organic law outlined the administrative organization into provinces and other territorial entities. However, the government's execution lagged, only achieving the 2010 goal of establishing 26 provinces by 2015.^[8]

In 2010, MONUC became the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), now supporting an elected government. Joseph Kabila won re-election in 2011 amid accusations of corruption and electoral fraud.

Subsequent ambiguity about Kabila's potential third term — from which he was constitutionally barred — coupled with a two-year election delay, sparked sustained and widespread protests and created significant instability. Following international pressure, Kabila announced in mid-2018 that he would not seek re-election. National and provincial elections were eventually held in December 2018 but faced significant disputes by the opposition and civil society.

According to domestic election observers, opposition leader Martin Fayulu won the presidential contest. Félix Tshisekedi was officially declared the winner. His inauguration inspired some hope as it was the first peaceful transition of power in DR Congo since its independence. President Tshisekedi was forced into a governing coalition with the outgoing President Kabila supporters who at the time maintain a significant grip on power as a result of a substantial majority in parliament. Tshisekedi's Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (UDPS), Kabila's Front Commun pour le Congo (FCC), and Tshisekedi's running mate, Vital Kamerhe's Union pour la Nation Congolaise (UNC) governed the country through a rickety coalition government which collapsed after about four months as Tshisekedi declared that the power-sharing deal was blocking his agenda for reforms and then formed a new government that was known as the '[Sacred Union of the Nation](#)'.

President Tshisekedi was re-elected in the December 2023 presidential election and the population is still waiting for his new government. His first term in office was defined by three major factors: questions over the legitimacy of his 2019 election victory, violence in the eastern of DR Congo and the state of the country's economy. Some of his first term in office successes include DR Congo's joining of the East Africa Community, improved access to education especially for girls and at earlier ages and a modest upturn in economic growth since the Covid-19 pandemic. Much work remains for President Tshisekedi in his second term to improve the lives of Congolese citizens.

Endnotes

1. World Bank, Democratic Republic of Congo, Systematic Country Diagnostic, Report No. 112733-ZR, 2018.
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8. The breakdown of the Katanga province into several smaller provinces also aimed at stripping the former Katanga governor and then-presidential hopeful Moïse Katumbi of a potential electoral base. DP Zongwe, Decentralization in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Autonomy Arrangements in the World, March 2019, 10–14, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.20028.08321.

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Dr Blessing Chipanda joined the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme in January 2023. Before joining the ISS he worked as an assistant lecturer/research assistant at the University of Pretoria, Department of Economics. He is particularly interested in tasks within the wider realm of international trade, development economics, public policy, monetary policy, and econometric modelling. Equally interested in economic and socio-economic activities that impact social welfare. Blessing has a PhD in economics from the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

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