

International Information Campaign

(For distribution among networks of international actors—both civil and political)

THE SITUATION REGARDING DEMOCRACY, THE RULE OF LAW AND SOCIO-POLITICAL FORCES IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO AT THE BEGINNING OF 2026. WHAT TO DO?

The dismantling of democracy and the rule of law, which had only begun to take root in the Democratic Republic of the Congo following the adoption of the 2006 Constitution and the organization of general elections that same year, clearly started under the regime of Joseph Kabila (2001–2018).

By way of illustration, this process included the 2011 constitutional amendment that replaced the two-round presidential electoral system with a single-round system in order to increase the incumbent President's chances of victory; the refusal to organize elections in 2016 in pursuit of a third presidential term explicitly prohibited by the Constitution; and the substitution of the winner of the 2018 presidential election, Mr. Martin Fayulu, by one of the defeated candidates, proclaimed President of the Republic, Mr. Félix Tshisekedi.

This dismantling process subsequently accelerated under the presidency of Félix Tshisekedi. It manifested itself, among other things, through the widely contested and allegedly illegal overthrow of the parliamentary majority in 2021; a mode of governance characterized by persistent and deliberate violations of the Constitution and statutory laws; a deliberately flawed electoral process in December 2023, marked by the targeted distribution of voting machines to ruling-party supporters in order to facilitate electoral fraud; and the official announcement, in 2024, of a constitutional revision project aimed at paving the way for a third presidential term.

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At the beginning of 2026, it is above all the explicit and openly assumed violations of Congolese citizens' civil and political rights, observed since the second half of 2025, that demonstrate the advanced erosion of democracy and the rule of law, within a clear strategy of consolidating authoritarian rule in the DRC. These violations include in particular:

- **Harassment, night-time abductions, and arbitrary arrests of dissenting voices, without due process:**
 - Aubin Minaku, Emmanuel Shadari, John Kabamba, Stéphane Shisso, Nathanaël Onokomba, Papy Mawesi, Dunia Kilanga, Parole Kamizelo, Norbert Yamba Yamba, among others.
- **Forced exile of opposition party leaders and other key political and civil actors:**
 - Joseph Kabilé, Matata Mponey, Moïse Katumbi, Seth Kikuni, Claudel Lubaya, Frank Diongo, Jean-Claude Vuemba, Pero Luwara, among others.
- **The suspension or banning of opposition political parties**, particularly those that chose to align with the former President of the Republic within the platform known as "*Save the DRC*" (*Sauvons la RDC*).

This systematic dismantling of democracy and the rule of law stems primarily from the ruling elites' determination to perpetuate their hold on power and preserve a predatory political system. Its implementation has been facilitated by the chronic structural weaknesses of domestic social and political forces.

The disintegration and demobilization of Congolese civil society as an organized and militant social force—apart from the notable exceptions of the leadership of the Catholic Church in Congo and the Protestant Church in Congo—are now at an advanced stage. This trend continues to worsen as democracy and the rule of law further erode. Yet, under such circumstances, the opposite dynamic should have prevailed to keep alive the struggle for political freedoms and socio-economic rights. If this reality is not rapidly reversed, Congolese society will remain, for a long time to come, an easy prey to the authoritarian ambitions of any governing authority, including those emerging from political opposition movements—a reality clearly illustrated by the current President.

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The severe weakening of opposition political parties constitutes another major factor that leaves the ruling power virtually unchecked. Their inconsistency and lack of strategic coherence over the past four electoral cycles have ultimately eroded public trust, with populations increasingly unresponsive to their calls for mobilization. This applies to both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition forces. Prior to the 2023 elections, there still existed a parliamentary opposition capable of influencing institutional political dynamics. Today, this opposition has been reduced to approximately 20 deputies out of 500 in the National Assembly, none in the 26 provincial assemblies, and only 3 senators out of 100 in the Senate.

One actor that had begun to exert a form of leverage capable of significantly influencing the political balance in Kinshasa was the AFC/M23 rebellion, supported by Rwanda, particularly following its capture of the cities of Goma and Bukavu. However, following the signing of the DRC-Rwanda Peace Agreement in Washington on December 4, 2025, and the resulting loss of its military pressure capacity, the AFC/M23 has also become politically weakened. This loss of leverage is all the more real as the government in Kinshasa is no longer in much of a hurry to negotiate, aiming instead to postpone the 2028 elections due to that conflict (the political exploitation of 'Rwandan aggression' has been evident since the beginning of the conflict, in contrast to the numerous other armed conflicts currently underway across the country).

Furthermore, the growing fatigue of the international community with the inconsistency and lack of credibility of Congolese political actors has led to near indifference regarding issues of democracy and the rule of law in the DRC. After exerting strong pressure on the Kabilia regime between 2016 and 2018 to prevent a third presidential term, the international community gradually accommodated itself to the ongoing dismantling of Congo's fragile democratic institutions by the current authorities. This posture has granted the latter greater latitude to pursue—and even intensify—the violations of Congolese citizens' civil and political rights outlined above.

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What to Do?

The reconstruction of a strong and mobilizable civil society across the entire national territory, on one hand, and the remobilization of the international community to re-engage it with Congolese political issues, on the other, constitute the two major and urgent actions to be undertaken starting in 2026 to save democracy and the rule of law in the DRC.

There are two major civil society structures in the DRC whose leadership's commitment to Congolese democracy is unwavering: the Catholic Church of Congo and the Protestant Church in Congo. These are also the two structures whose presence is effective across the entire national territory through parishes scattered throughout the country. At the local level, these parishes represent the best-organized and best-equipped structures, both in terms of infrastructure and human resources, consisting of active lay elites as parishioners. All these factors make these two structures the foundation for rapidly rebuilding a strong and mobilizable civil society. Organizing these lay parishioners is a matter of absolute urgency!

To remobilize the international community, it is up to the Congolese civil elites committed to democracy and the rule of law to assume their historical responsibility. They must facilitate the emergence of new leadership cohorts characterized by professional competence and moral probity whom international actors could trust once again, following the disillusionment imposed upon them by the current political class (both in power and in opposition) during the four legislatures since 2006.

The inclusive national dialogue so often demanded—for which the Fathers of the two Churches have been fighting since January 2025, but which the Kinshasa government opposes—remains essential for defining a credible roadmap to safeguard democracy and the rule of law in Congo. The fight for its realization must continue. However, in the absence of structured social forces and effective political pressure—both internal and external—capable of forcing the government to comply with the resulting roadmap, the latter risks remaining a dead letter.

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