

Testimony
Tom Malinowski
Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
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Thank you Chairman McGovern for your continued leadership and that of the Commission in defending human rights around the world, and for your focus on Democratic Republic of the Congo (D.R.C.) today.

One of the most important political developments we have seen in the world in the last few years has been the popular movement for constitutional term limits in Africa. All across the continent, ordinary citizens, mostly young people, are challenging the idea that leaders can change the rules in the middle of the game so that they stay in power for as long as they like.

It is the policy of the United States to stand with them. This policy is not meant to be a judgment on any particular leader. It's based on our observation that leaders who cling to office for term after term eventually are able to consolidate power around their person in ways that undermine the checks and balances necessary for democracy to work. Democracy is stronger when there are regular, peaceful transitions of power from one group of leaders to another, and from one generation to another. That's why President Obama said last year before the African Union that "no one should be president for life." That message has aligned us with the aspirations of large majorities of people in country after country in Africa.

In the last two years, we've seen the popular movement for term limits succeed in Burkina Faso. In Senegal, voters refused to re-elect a president who was trying for a controversial third term, and the new president has supported changing the constitution to shorten the amount of time presidents can stay in office.

In other countries, leaders have resisted calls to respect term limits. We've seen this in the Republic of Congo, in Rwanda, and with the most tragic consequences in Burundi,

Now this same drama is playing out on an even bigger stage, with even greater potential consequences, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. On December 19th, the second and constitutionally-stipulated final term of President Joseph Kabila will come to an end. There should have been an election this month to choose his successor. The government has claimed, including in a recent letter to the Washington Post, that the delay has happened only because elections in the D.R.C. are complicated to organize and take time to prepare. This is preposterous – the government has always known how long the preparations would take, and deliberately did not start them on time. Instead, it has followed a strategy of bureaucratic delay (referred to in French as "glissement"), causing the election to be postponed at least until the latter part of 2017.

This has led to widespread anger across the D.R.C. In a poll released last month by the Congo Research Group, 81% of respondents rejected changing the constitution to allow Kabila to run for a third term, and 74% said Kabila should leave office when his term ends next month.

Given the D.R.C.'s size, position in the region, and history of conflict, the potential for conflict and mass atrocities if this situation is not resolved is very real. The civil war that began in the D.R.C. in the late 1990s was arguably the deadliest conflict in the world since WWII, resulting in more than five million deaths, and drawing in neighbors across the region. Ensuring timely and credible elections and a peaceful transition is particularly important in a country recovering from such a recent trauma.

President Kabila's refusal to state publicly that he will not seek a third term has already fueled mass protests that have been met with violence by the security forces against peaceful activists, political and religious leaders, and others. In September in Kinshasa, for example, Congolese security forces violent suppression of peaceful protestors left dozens dead and hundreds injured. Opposition party offices were burned. Human rights investigators kicked out.

So far this year, the UN Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO) has documented a 216% increase in the number of human rights violations from all of last year.

The government has also cracked down on journalists and blocked radio signals to deny Congolese access to credible, independent reporting during moments of political tension. Including two of the most critical sources of information for the Congolese people, Radio France International (RFI) and the UN-funded Radio Okapi.

In short, the potential for violence and long-term civil unrest in the D.R.C. is extraordinarily high unless the government takes immediate steps to reach an inclusive resolution with the opposition that guarantees the holding of presidential elections and a transfer in executive power.

We have been working intensively since the beginning of this crisis to encourage a path forward based on democratic principles and respect for human rights. My colleague Special Envoy Perriello has spearheaded our diplomatic efforts, which he will describe in a moment. We've worked in close coordination with regional states who worry that they would bear the consequences if the political situation in the D.R.C. were to unravel, and with our partners in Europe. We have also signaled our determination to hold accountable those individuals responsible for acts that threaten the D.R.C.'s peace and security or undermine democratic processes and institutions by imposing targeted sanctions, as has the European Union. We have already sanctioned three security personnel responsible for human rights violations and more designations will come if these actions continue.

In this context, we should also keep in mind the growing allegations of corruption against the D.R.C. government and its financial backers. According to Global Witness and the Enough Project, corruption is diverting billions of dollars in revenues that should go to the D.R.C. treasury and support public services; this is especially harmful given the macroeconomic difficulties the D.R.C. is currently facing. Law enforcement agencies throughout the world are increasingly interested in investigating and prosecuting corruption associated with high

government officials when the proceeds enter the international financial system, as they inevitably do. While this is not the provenance of the State Department, I think it's reasonable to assume that leaders clinging to power in defiance of their people and the international community will find themselves more exposed to such scrutiny.

For all these reasons, it should be clear that a peaceful transition consistent with the D.R.C.'s constitution would be in the region's best interest, the country's best interest and in President Kabila's best interest. I am confident that the international community will stay engaged at the highest levels in support of the Congolese people and their pursuit of a more democratic and prosperous future.