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Vote Count Continues in Congo Election

By The Associated Press

KINSHASA, Congo—Second place might be good enough for the former rebel trailing President Joseph Kabila in Congo's historic election—at least this time around.

Election results were trickling in from the July 30 balloting, but too slowly to point to a winner. And with 33 candidates, it will be difficult for any candidate to win the majority needed to avoid a runoff between the top two vote-getters, likely in October.

The results so far show Kabila doing well in the east, where he was born. His main rival, vice president and former rebel leader Jean-Pierre Bemba was expected to do well in the capital, Kinshasa, and elsewhere in the west, where he is embraced as a regional son.

A preliminary countrywide tally was expected to be announced on Sunday and a final tally Aug. 31. A quarter of the estimated 20 million ballots cast had been counted by Monday, but no results have been reported from Kinshasa.

The 44-year-old Bemba's fluency in Lingala, the dominant language of the west and one that Kabila only recently began to learn, has endeared him to voters.

His campaign slogan, “100 percent Congolese,” was a not-so-subtle reference to questions about Kabila's origins. Kabila was born in eastern Congo, but spent much of his childhood in exile in Tanzania. Bemba himself has Angolan as well as Congolese ancestry.

Bemba, one of four vice presidents in Congo's transitional government, also is a forceful and eloquent orator, in contrast with the relatively reclusive and soft-spoken Kabila.

Going into the vote, Kabila was seen as the front-runner because many in Congo credit him with taking the initiative to end the country's 1996-2002 war by uniting warring rebels to form a transitional government. But some also are suspicious that he is being forced on them by the international community.

“Bemba is a real Congolese, he understands our country's needs,” said

David Ndundo, a 19-year-old art student in Kinshasa. "He will work for the benefit of Congo, not for another country."

As a rebel, Bemba spent several years living in the forests of the north, acquainting himself with the Congolese interior and perfecting his Lingala.

But he also has been accused of committing war crimes during his years in the bush.

The Central African Republic this year issued an international arrest warrant for Bemba, alleging he supported the now-ousted president of that country, Ange-Felix Patasse, during a successful rebellion. Bemba's case has been referred to the International Criminal Court at The Hague.

Some fear former rebel leaders like Bemba, who stand to lose lucrative positions in government after the elections, could rekindle conflict.

Bemba promised during his campaign that he would restore lasting peace to the restive east.

"Give me six months and all Congo will be in peace. I am a patriot," Bemba said at a campaign rally. "I fought for five years to bring democracy to this country. Vote for me and I will rebuild our country."

Bemba, who was allied with the political elite from former dictator Mobutu Sese Seko 32-year rule, controlled vast tracts in his native northwestern Equator province during Congo's war and made a fortune trading coffee, gold and other minerals.

Bemba, who held the finance portfolio during the transition years and is the son of a prominent Congolese businessman, has promised to encourage private investment and repair Mobutu's damage to the economy by rebuilding roads and resurrecting broken electricity and water infrastructure.

"If I don't improve your lives in five years, never vote for me again," Bemba, who studied business in Belgium, said on the campaign trail. "I understand business, I will improve the economy."