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Kabila Allies Sweep Top Posts in Congo Parliament

By Joe Bavier

Reuters

KINSHASA — An advisor to President Joseph Kabila was named head of the Democratic Republic of Congo's new National Assembly late on Thursday, in a ballot that saw presidential allies sweep key parliamentary posts.

Vital Kamerhe, a former minister and secretary-general of Kabila's People's Party for Reconstruction and Development, was elected as the legislature's president after another Kabila ally withdrew at the last minute. His sole remaining opponent garnered just 41 of the 465 ballots cast.

"This victory means that I was not only the candidate of my political family ... I was the candidate of everyone," Kamerhe told Reuters after his election.

Kabila's coalition, the Alliance of the Presidential Majority (AMP), won 332 of the 500 seats in the legislature at July elections, Congo's first democratic polls in more than 40 years.

It took six of the seven parliamentary positions in the ballot which stretched until the early hours of Friday. The remaining post will be decided in a second round of voting on Friday.

The opposition Union for the Nation—a coalition led by former rebel Jean-Pierre Bemba who lost to Kabila in a presidential runoff in October—had criticised the president's supporters for changing parliamentary bylaws to secure control of influential commissions.

Some opposition legislators said the AMP should have left some posts for small parties by not contesting all seven races.

"We allowed democracy to run its course," Kamerhe said. "But we'll work together. I'll have to respond to the needs of both the majority and the minority."

The new parliament will replace a body of appointed government supporters, rebels and civil society members, which helped run Congo during the three-year transition period following the country's 1998-2003 war.

Kamerhe said lawmakers will begin work as soon as a prime minister is chosen and a new government formed.

Kabila was sworn in earlier this month promising to unify the country, plagued by decades of mismanagement and a six-year conflict that saw an estimated four million Congolese die, mainly from starvation and disease.

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