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## **Congo Holds First Multiparty Election in 46 Years**

By Jeffrey Gettleman

KINSHASA, Congo—Jules Mabuisi had waited a long time for this.

At the age of 80, he has been ruled by Belgians, dictators and a cadre of warlords who carved up his country and then watched it rot. On Sunday, for the first time in decades, he was allowed to cast a meaningful vote.

“Where do I mark?” Mr. Mabuisi asked, staring at a ballot with hundreds of names and little faces on it.

He was among the millions of Congolese who streamed to polling places on Sunday — on foot, by bike, even by log canoe — for the first multiparty vote since shortly after independence in an election meant to bring peace to Congo and elsewhere in Central Africa, one of the poorest, most violent regions on earth. Nearly four million people have died as a result of fighting and chaos in Congo since 1998, according to the International Rescue Committee.

In Kinshasa, Congo’s capital, people waited in long, mostly orderly lines, including men in double-breasted suits and women in African finery balancing buckets of baguettes on their heads.

Sporadic violence occurred before the vote, including an episode a few days ago at a political rally where a policeman was doused with gasoline and burned to death. But election day went off without widespread complications, said officials of the United Nations, which organized and supervised the voting.

That was no small feat. Congo is a country the size of Western Europe with impressive mineral riches and 60 million people but only 300 miles of paved roads. Much of it is nearly impenetrable jungle that can be reached only by helicopter or boat.

Because of the number of candidates — about 9,700 for 500 national assembly seats and 33 for president — the ballots were huge, weighing a total of 3.6 million pounds. There were 50,000 polling places. The election cost \$458 million and was the biggest and most complicated the United Nations has ever run.

Because of all the logistical challenges, the official election results are not expected for weeks. If no presidential candidate gets a majority, a runoff is scheduled for fall.

The leading presidential contender is the incumbent, Joseph Kabila, a relaxed 35-year-old who inherited the office from his father and is trying to legitimize his rule. He calls himself an “artisan of peace,” and many people said they voted for him because they thought he was the only person powerful enough to unite Congo and prevent another relapse into war.

But several of the largest opposition parties boycotted the vote. They contended that the election was rigged from the beginning by top politicians, including Mr. Kabila, saying that these politicians had used their militias to intimidate voters and had taken money from state coffers to finance their campaigns. “This is a masquerade,” said Norbert Luyeye, an opposition leader. “Criminals are running our country. They know if there’s a free election, they will be pushed aside and prosecuted.”

In Congo, those complaints are nothing new. This vast territory has been plundered shamelessly since King Leopold II of Belgium colonized it in the late 19th century to extract as much rubber and ivory as possible. The Belgian overseers who followed were not much better, notorious for their use of the chicotte, a hippopotamus-hide whip they cracked over Congolese backs.

That all ended in 1960, when Belgium abruptly granted Congo independence and Patrice Lumumba was elected prime minister. He was assassinated a few months later, paving the way for Mobutu Sese Seko, an athletic young army colonel who soon metastasized into the caricature of a dictator, building palaces and guzzling pink Champagne while his people starved. Once the cold war ended and Western support dried up, his power faded.

Rwanda and Uganda teamed up with a rebel movement lead by a former Marxist, Laurent D. Kabila, and deposed Mr. Mobutu in 1997.

Mr. Kabila became as autocratic as Mr. Mobutu, and eventually Rwanda and Uganda turned on him. Mr. Kabila called for help from Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe, and soon Congo was full of foreign armies fighting over its spoils. When Mr. Kabila was assassinated in 2001, Joseph, his eldest son, took over, again a leadership change without any input from the people.

Joseph Kabila made peace with his enemies, agreed to hold elections and welcomed warlords into the interim government.

Several are running for president, including Azarias Ruberwa, who is popular in eastern Congo, and Jean-Pierre Bemba, who has been accused of serious human rights abuses and even cannibalism.

Many people on Kinshasa's garbage-strewn streets cynically refer to the whole group as "the belligerents."

On Sunday morning, Vemba Kumbu, a watchman, ran his thumb down the ballot and shook his head.

"I'd like to vote," he said. "But I don't really see anyone I want to vote for."

In Bunia, in the east, Besisa Mbaguna walked barefoot for two and a half hours to cast his vote for Mr. Kabila.

"It was not a difficult walk," he said. "It was for a good reason."

Western diplomats said peace in Congo was especially important because Congo's rebellions had destabilized the entire region.

"In Central Africa, there is no center of political gravity and there won't be one until this country can come right," said William Lacy Swing, the top United Nations official in Congo.

The biggest worry is how the potential losers could react, especially Mr. Bemba, whose followers have already clashed with the police.

Some people within Mr. Kabila's government said it might be better if Mr. Kabila did not win outright and instead won in a runoff because that would avoid giving the impression that the election had been fixed, which could spell trouble.

Mr. Mabuisi, the 80-year-old voter who has lived through it all, said he voted for Mr. Bemba because he was worried about what would happen if Mr. Bemba lost.

“This is democracy,” he said, as he slipped his precious voting card in his pocket and walked away.

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