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## **Kabila Promises New Era for Congo**

*Nation Inaugurates First Freely Elected Leader Since 1960*

By Eddy Isango

KINSHASA, Congo — After decades of dictatorship and wars, Congo on Wednesday swore in its first freely elected president since 1960, installing Joseph Kabila, the son of a rebel leader, who promised a new era of order and better days ahead.

"This moment marks the beginning of a new era that must bring well-being and development to Congo's people," Kabila said at his inauguration ceremony outside the presidential palace. "I see a Congo where the people are always able to work."

Kabila, declared the winner of an October presidential runoff vote, took his oath after a series of prayers from different faiths—including Islam, Christianity and the indigenous Kimbanguist Church. Thousands of onlookers shaded themselves from the sun under umbrellas in the national colors of blue, red and yellow.

Though he has been accused of continuing a trend of corruption and ignoring abuses by his army, Kabila, 35, is widely praised for ushering in a peace plan that ended the 1998-2002 wars that drew in the armies of at least six countries and for creating a unity government that organized the central African country's first multiparty elections in more than four decades.

Congo, rich in cobalt, diamonds, copper, gold and other minerals, gained independence from Belgium in 1960 and was ruled for 32 years by Mobutu Sese Seko, a dictator who changed the country's name to Zaire and plundered its wealth, pocketing billions. Kabila's father helped depose Mobutu, but was assassinated by his bodyguards in 2001. The younger Kabila then took power.

A series of conflicts and street clashes have marred the transition and the election -- often with army units battling each other. In the east, troops loyal to a renegade general have fought the army in recent days.

The 17,500 U.N. peacekeeping troops in Congo have been called upon repeatedly to keep the peace, but the violence has never fully derailed the process started four years ago.

Kabila won the runoff with 58 percent of the vote, compared with about 42 percent for his rival, vice president and former rebel leader Jean-Pierre Bemba.

Bemba had contested the results but said he would resign himself to political opposition after his court challenge failed. He was not present at Wednesday's ceremony. In his speech, Kabila endorsed the right of political opponents to organize under Congo's constitution.

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