

NATIONAL SECURITY AND FULFILLED PROMISES? A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF THE STATE OF SIEGE IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

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DOI: 10.24193/subbeuropaea.2021.2.03

Published Online: 2021-12-30

Published Print: 2021-12-30

Abstract

Already in the middle of his first term, Felix Tshisekedi has understood that his re-election depends only on the pacification of the eastern region of his deeply damaged country. For over 20 years, informality, corruption, death, trafficking, theft represented a modus vivendi in the North Kivu province. The state of siege implemented on May 6, 2021 is intended to be a major restoration of North Kivu and Ituri provinces. At that time, the provinces fell under the military control of the FARDC (Armed Forces of the DRC), which raises two main questions Is this measure fit to meet the goal established by the President, namely the pacification of the eastern region? Or is it a tool to reinforce the control of the President over the country? However, the State of Siege is more than an exceptional measure: it is a promise of the President to his people. Active, determined and involved in the two territories, with appropriate words addressed to the grieving population, Tshisekedi not only repeats the sensitive elements known worldwide, but he exceeds the usual limits: he desires to remove the "maguilles" from the national army and he wants institutions on which he can rely. Basically, the one who embodies the system is fighting it today. Within this article we aim at exploring if new approach to conflict is prolific and has the potential to succeed at least in its early stages. This study could be performed due to field data provided by Kivu Security Tracker.

Key words: Democratic Republic of Congo, discourse, State of Siege, North Kivu, Ituri, conflict, militarization, power

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Introduction

An unexpected announcement marks a new beginning for the national security: the military will take full control of two eastern regions. The President of the Republic, Félix Tshisekedi confirmed on May 3rd the state of siege measure in two provinces of North Kivu and Ituri hit by the violence of armed groups and the massacres of civilians (Ordinance 21/061 of May 3).¹ This measure was adopted on April 30, 2021 at the 1st Meeting of the Council of Ministers under the Sama Government.

Nord-Kivu and Ituri – Areas cut from the rest of the country

The dimensions of the Congolese conflict have varied tremendously across the time, which has led to a complex situation difficult to manage. Armed violence in the eastern Congo is the direct consequence of two bloody wars: the first Congolese war between 1996-1997 (the overthrow of Mobutu by the revolutionary rebellion of Laurent Desiré Kabila) and the second one, known also as the African World War, during 1998-2002 (triggered by self-proclaimed President Kabila who turned against those who brought him to power: Rwanda and Uganda).² The peace agreements did not bring the peace so needed, on the contrary, the bloody events continued up to now at different levels both nationally and internationally.³ Nonetheless, compared to previous years, a decrease in the number of belligerents can be noticed. This period corresponds to the new ascent of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the main actor in the theatre of violence in North Kivu. Kivu Security Tracker inventory counts around 122 across the entire eastern Congo, including North Kivu, South Kivu, Ituri

¹ Ordonnance n° 21/016 du 3 mai 2021 portant mesures d'application de l'Etat de Siege sur une partie du territoire de la République Démocratique du Congo, Cabinet du Président de la République, Kinshasa.

Ordinance n°21/016 of May 3, 2021 on implementing measures for the State of Siege on part of the territory of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Office of the President, Kinshasa.

² Andreea Bianca Urs, Sergiu Mișcoiu, "The USA's return to the heart of Africa. Strategies, conflicts and counterfeit terrorism in the Democratic Republic of Congo" in Valentin Naumescu, Raluca Moldovan, Anda Ghilescu (eds.) *The new transatlantic relations and the perspectives of the global order*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2021, pp. 65-83.

³ *Ibidem*.

and Tanganyika.⁴ Actually, the ADF are the main actor in the theatre of violence in North Kivu, they are accused of the massacre of more than 1,000 civilians since November 2019 in the territory of Beni and it is the only group in this region to be considered a terrorist organization.⁵ The ADF gradually expanded to Ituri, province affected by the violence committed by CODECO (Cooperative for Development of the Congo).⁶

The Congolese state is profoundly influenced by society and the powerful actors. The rebels from these 122 groups fight for various reasons, especially economic.⁷ Generally, living largely in the exploration and exploitation of its raw materials, DRC's economic structure is highly dominated by the mining sector.⁸ Rebels operating areas include many factors that support the growth of the informal economy as porous borders, local trade and domination of the local population.⁹ As Kristof Titeca argues, "state is a priori absent from the informal economy"¹⁰ the informal economy had already become a dominant survival mode in light of an incapable and violent state.¹¹ Furthermore, absence of the state does not mean that a void exists in its place.¹² Thus, in the absence of state support, it is perfectly understandable that civilians accept the protection received from the rebels or other non-state entities.

Many of those who join armed groups, including the ADF, do not do so for ideological reasons but for economic reasons and because it gives

⁴ Kivu Security Tracker, "The Landscape of Armed Groups in Eastern Congo: Missed Opportunities, Protracted Insecurity, and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies," *Kivu Security Tracker/Congo Research Group*, February 2021.

⁵ Andreea Bianca Urs, « Du conflit au terrorisme en RD Congo », in *Studia Europaea*, LXV, 1, 2020, pp. 55-73.

⁶ Andreea Bianca Urs, « Comprendre le conflit actuel de l'Ituri », in *Analele Universității din Oradea*, 2021, pp. 209-218.

⁷ Kivu Security Tracker, "The Landscape of Armed Groups ...".

⁸ Andreea Bianca Urs, "Überlegungen und Perspektiven zur neuen chinesischen Ordnung in der Demokratischen Republik Kongo", in *Studia Europaea*, No. 1, 2021, pp. 61-82.

⁹ Sergiu Mișcoiu, Louis-Marie Kakdeu, „Authoritarian clientelism: the case of the president's 'creatures' in Cameroon“, in *Acta Politica*, N^o. 1, Vol. 56, 2021, pp. 1-29.

¹⁰ Kristof Titeca, "A Historical Perspective on State Engagement in Informal Trade on the Uganda-Congo Border", Bridenthal, R. (ed.) *The hidden history of crime, corruption and states*, New York: Berghan Books, 2013, p. 174.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*. p. 178.

them social status. In addition, in places, the ADF has merged into the population, and it has become very difficult to say who is part of it. You can't just say there are the "good guys" and the "bad guys", the reality is much more complex. The state-society approach argues that it is necessary to leave a state-centric approach in studying regulation in particular localities.¹³ Thus, in a country where everything changes depending on military contingencies, a change in strategy based on local needs could work. Local life in the eastern region is characterized by ongoing conflicts and negotiation between the non-state armed actors.

Second year of Félix Antoine Tshilombo Tshisekedi

In the capital Kinshasa, things have changed with the election of Félix Tshisekedi in December 2018 and especially with the political switch he operated in December 2020. In the presidential elections of 2018, the incumbent President Joseph Kabila, who was no longer allowed to run, initially supported his party's candidate, Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary, before realising that the latter's chances were low and that the best strategy would be to support the less radical opposition candidate, Tshisekedi. Tshisekedi made a governmental alliance with the former President's party but started to mark his differences with his predecessor's political orientation and agenda.¹⁴ The lethal coup took place in December 6, 2020 through a lightening speech, when Tshisekedi announced the end of the incumbent coalition and proclaimed the 'Sacred Union' of the nation, which meant in fact that Kabila's supporters (and most notably the MPs and the governors) had the 'patriotic duty' to join the new presidential majority, isolating in this way his former ally. In terms of foreign policy and attracting foreign aid, Felix Tshisekedi, Chairperson of the African Union for the year 2021, certainly has a major lead over his predecessor, which did not have such a definite position in this direction. Noticed by the international community, the actions of the new president have consequences on several levels: economic, political and security.¹⁵

Despite his growing popularity, the survey report signed by Congo Research Group reveals that management of Covid-19 was the least

¹³ Kristof Titeca, *art.cit.*, p. 175.

¹⁴ Andreea Bianca Urs, Sergiu Mişcoiu, *art.cit.*, pp. 65-83.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

appreciated action.¹⁶ According to this rapport, the apparent popularity of Tshisekedi contrasts with the persistent frustrations of Congolese people. Respondents are critical of the government insecurity: 58% of them consider that Felix Tshisekedi has not kept his promise campaign to pacify the East, but 57% of respondents, mainly in the western provinces of the country, argue that the defense and security forces are less abusive under the current president. Furthermore, the majority (64%) were dissatisfied with the curfew, with respondents, especially in the provinces of Bandundu, Kivu and Central Congo, not praising the government's response strategy to the coronavirus pandemic. At least 32 parliamentarians have died since the start of the pandemic, but that has not affected Congolese skepticism about the virus. Especially since few respondents say they don't know infected people around them. Not surprisingly, 74% of them say they would not get vaccinated. As a result, health authorities had to reallocate 75% of 1.7 million vaccines AstraZeneca supplied to the Congo due to a lack of capacity and interest in the vaccine (GEC, 2021).¹⁷

Instead, things have remained the same in the East. Nevertheless, considering the high level of violence and increased number of killings, including the death of Italian ambassador in the DRC in February 2021, Tshisekedi understood that the pacification of eastern region can't be postponed. In this regard, he implemented the State of Siege in North-Kivu and Ituri provinces starting with May 6, 2021.

National security and fulfilled promises? A brief analysis

Generally, a state of exception (*Ausnahmezustand*) is a concept introduced in the 1920s by Carl Schmitt, similar to a state of emergency but based in the sovereign's ability to transcend the rule of law in the name of the public good.¹⁸ Schmitt establishes clearly: "whoever decides on a state of exception is sovereign"¹⁹ this distinction being the key to understanding

¹⁶ GEC / BERCI, « L'an 2 de Tshisekedi. Année de l'émancipation ? », *Groupe d'étude sur le Congo, Bureau d'études, de recherche et de consulting international (BERCI)*, July 2021.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*, [1922], Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2009, p. 13

¹⁹ „Souverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet“, Carl Schmitt, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

this concept and in most cases it is about the President. This concept is developed in Giorgio Agamben's work *State of Exception* and Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics*. Firstly, Agamben traces the origin of the state of exception back to the French Revolution and he claims that the state of exception has become "the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics".²⁰ Based on intensive theoretical and circumstantial research and in a tumultuous post-war context, Giorgio Agamben tried to formulate a very-general theory of the state of exception:

the state of exception is neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other.²¹

These nuances become more contoured in *Necropolitics* where Achille Mbembe claims that the colony is "the site par excellence where controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended—the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of civilization"²² Furthermore, Mbembe stresses that the permanent simulation of the state of exception justifies "the war against terror"— "a war of eradication, indefinite, absolute, that claims the right to cruelty, torture, and indefinite detention—and so a war that draws its weapons from the "evil" that it pretends to be eradicating, in a context in which the law and justice are applied in the form of endless reprisals, vengeance, and revenge".²³ In our case, the evil to be eradicated is the well-known ADF.

What is State of Siege in the Democratic Republic of Congo? Basically, State of Siege means the transfer of power from the central government to the military sector. During the State of Siege, a soldier assisted by a police officer will be at the head of the provinces. Provincial assemblies and provincial governments will also be suspended during the same period and their powers will be transferred to the provincial military authorities. The effects of the state of siege imply a transfer of authority and is characterized by an increase in the content of ordinary police powers, by the possibility of a relinquishment of civil authorities by the

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 6.

²² Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, Durham: Duke University Press, p. 88.

²³ *Ibidem.*, p. 49.

military authorities and by the expansion of the jurisdiction of military courts. Concretely, the superior direction and the responsibility for the internal defense are transferred to the military authority. The powers vested in the civilian authority for the maintenance of law and order and the police pass entirely to the military authority. The civilian authorities, however, continue to exercise powers which the military authority does not relinquish, and, in practice, the military authorities are often reluctant to take the place of the civilian authorities and prefer to collaborate with them in the maintenance of public order.

The State of Siege is therefore a regime restricting public freedoms that can be applied to all or part of the territory. The suspension or restriction of public freedoms may concern: individual freedom (movement, demonstration); the rights of foreigners; the right to property; freedom of assembly; the right to strike; the freedom to come and go; the inviolability of homes and searches; the right to property; freedom of commerce and industry, freedom of expression and communication, national mobilization, replacement of civil courts by military courts; increased surveillance of the population. The State of Siege was extended 9 times so far and, according to the President's discourse at UN on September 21, 2021, "the state of siege will be lifted in North Kivu and Ituri when the circumstances that motivated it will disappear".²⁴ But, in the ninth extension of the State of Siege, the National Assembly had demanded from the government a "management plan to exit the state of siege" before the 10th extension of the State of Siege.²⁵

General Constant Ndima Kongba (military governor of North Kivu) and General Luboya Nkashama (military governor of Ituri) are in charge for the military process. They have extensive military experience and have at their disposal serious human and financial resources. Also, President

²⁴ « Félix Tshisekedi à l'ONU : « Nous avons assisté au discours d'un chef qui rassure » (UDPS Tshilumbayi)", 23.09.2021, [Félix Tshisekedi à l'ONU : « Nous avons assisté au discours d'un chef qui rassure » (UDPS Tshilumbayi) | Radio Okapi], accessed on 25.09.2021.

²⁵ « Assemblée nationale : examen ce jeudi du projet de loi portant prorogation de l'état de siège pour la 10e fois », 14.10.2021, [<https://actualite.cd/2021/10/14/etat-de-siege-en-ituri-et-au-nord-kivu-le-gouvernement-na-pas-transmis-lassemblee>], accessed on 20.10.2021.

Félix Tshisekedi authorized the deployment of US anti-terrorist experts.²⁶ Interestingly, in eastern DRC, not only the autonomous armed groups but also the Congolese army itself was being held responsible for human rights abuses and the maintenance of a climate of fear and impunity against the citizens it is supposed to protect.²⁷

The results of this measure are long awaited. After 4 months, there is no significant progress in the area. On the contrary, violence is gradually amplifying: 533 people were killed between May and July alone in North Kivu and Ituri,²⁸ a record that calls into question the effectiveness of the State of Siege. According to data collected by the Kivu Security Tracker (KST) since the state of siege was decreed by President Félix Tshisekedi on April 30, civilian security as a whole has, in fact, gotten worse in North Kivu and Ituri provinces: at least 723 civilians have been killed by armed actors the North Kivu and Ituri since May 6. Two questions are required. Firstly, is this measure fit to meet the goal established by the President, namely the pacification of the eastern region? It can't be estimated yet based on existing results. Nevertheless, despite the obvious shortcomings, this measure represents a new strategy, which does not resemble with what has been used so far. An important aspect is the fact that the FARDC soldiers are well acquainted with the territories affected in the case and are aware of the real ruling needs.

Security issues in the East require a lot of financial resources and especially good management of them. The results of the State of Siege are negative following embezzlement, said national deputy Gratien Iracan. In an interview with Radio Okapi on Sunday August 8, Ituri's elected official

²⁶ "DR Congo Accepts US Military Help Against ADF Militia", 15.08.2021, [https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_dr-congo-accepts-us-military-help-against-adf-militia/6209612.html], accessed on 16.08.2021.

²⁷ Koen Vlassenroot, Emery Mudinga, Josaphat Musamba, "Navigating social spaces: armed mobilization and circular return in Eastern DR Congo", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 2020, Oxford University Press, pp. 832-852.

²⁸ « RDC : le mouvement citoyen Lucha demande la levée de l'état de siège dans l'est », 12.08.2021, [<https://actualite.cd/2021/08/12/rdc-le-mouvement-citoyen-lucha-demande-la-levée-de-letat-de-siège-dans-lest>], accessed on 17.08.2021.

regrets that 33 million USD has been released to finance the state of siege, but the two provinces have only been able to receive 8 million USD.²⁹

These elements lead to the answer to the second question. This ambiguous context can be used for the benefit of the president and his election campaign. The President has repeatedly promised the pacification of the eastern region and by implementing this measure, he can say that he has fulfilled his promise. This measure is also a response to very serious concern among public opinion. According to the poll by the Congo Research Group, 20% of respondents believe that security should be the government's priority, which ranks this issue in second place behind "social/living conditions", and ahead of "economy/jobs". During the month of April, there were protests (including in North Kivu) which not only called for MONUSCO to leave but also for the president to keep his word.³⁰

In this direction, media propaganda plays a colossal role, because the national army maximizes in public even the slightest success. For instance, a classic model found in the media: "A total of X people in connection with the ADF were arrested including X women alongside X firearms and several bladed weapons with military effects.....", usually coming from Nasson Murara, Beni's local police communicator. Moreover, at the start of June 2021, Kinshasa announced the pacification of the Mbau-Kamango trunk road, in the territory of Beni. Yet the reopening of this trunk road had already been announced in September 2020 by the then minister of defense, and no incident had been recorded on this road by KST in 2021.³¹ At first appearance, army-led operations are successful and have the expected effect: it raises public awareness. But in reality, these glorious media appearances are counterproductive, because most of the time the following strategies are announced in advance. For instance, there is public talk about the infiltration of fardc soldiers within the rebel groups. Thus, the rebels know where and how to attack and act in order to win. This

²⁹ RDC : le bilan de l'état de siège est négatif à la suite de détournement de fonds (Gratien Iracan), 08.09.2021, [<https://www.radiookapi.net/2021/08/09/actualite/securite/rdc-le-bilan-de-letat-de-siege-est-negatif-la-suite-de-detournement-de>], accessed on 22.09.2021.

³⁰ GEC/BERCI, « L'an 2 de Tshisekedi Année de l'émancipation ? », *Groupe d'étude sur le Congo, Bureau d'études, de recherche et de consulting international (BERCI)*, July 2021.

³¹ Pierre Boisselet, "Has the State of Siege Improved Security in the Eastern DRC?", *Kivu Security Tracker/Congo Research Group*, 15.06.2021, [<https://blog.kivusecurity.org/has-the-state-of-siege-improved-security-in-the-eastern-drc/>], accessed on 11.08.2021.

aspect also explains the symmetry of the attacks in the territories: when the army attacks, the ADF responds and vice versa, everything being extremely predictable.

For Agamben, “the suspension of the law is pivotal in that it directly affects people’s lives, not as subjects of politics or citizens, but as human beings as such”.³² Since the proclamation of the State of Siege, the provincial institutions have slowed down. According to the Ordinance seven people make up the political staff of the provincial government under the state of siege: the military governor and his deputy, as well as the five members of his cabinet. Seven people to replace a team made up of the governor, his deputy, ten provincial ministers and their respective advisers, or just over 70 people.³³ Clearly, more than military inefficiency, administrative and judicial³⁴ lockdown is seriously hurting the population. The dissatisfaction of part of the population with the state of siege is intensifying gradually in Ituri and North Kivu: thirteen militants of the *Lutte pour le changement* (Fight for Change-Lucha), which pleads for the demilitarization of administrations, were arrested and handed over to military justice.³⁵

Conclusions

To finish in Mbembe’s distinction, “perhaps more than about difference, the era is about the fantasy of separation, and even extermination”.³⁶ The complexity of the Congolese state is underestimated, and the general tendency is to highlight what the state isn’t and can’t. As we noted in the previous pages, beyond the question of the effectiveness of the State of Siege in solving short-term security problems in the eastern part of the country, there is the question of the functioning of the state in

³² Giorgio Agamben, *op.cit.*, p. 88.

³³ Fred Bauma, “Etat de Siege ou disfonctionnement de l’état au Nord Kivu”, *Congo Research Group/ Groupe d’Etude Sur le Congo*, Jul. 22, 2021, <http://congoresearchgroup.org/etat-de-siege-ou-dysfonctionnement-de-letat-au-nord-kivu/?lang=fr>, accessed on 16.09.2021.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ « RDC : la Lucha en guerre contre l’état de siège », 13.11.2021, [<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1265265/politique/rdc-la-lucha-en-guerre-contre-letat-de-siege/>], accessed on 14.11.2021.

³⁶ Achille Mbembe, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

these provinces. The solution is not that simple and visible, nor does it stop at a simple exceptional measure. Like the multiple failures of the DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration) program, the State of Siege emphasizes the unprofessionalism and frivolity of the FARDC and accentuates the colossal distance between the capital and the eastern part of the country. A predictable and irreparable effect could be the total decrease of the population's support for the national army.

On the other side, through this approach, president Tshisekedi has double gain: nationally, it will gain the trust of the population affected by ADF attacks over time; internationally, it will seem that he came out victorious in the fight against the terrorist threat, as he highlights on every occasion. Thus, ending the State of Siege with no palpable result could have enormous political costs for President Felix Tshisekedi, who has already announced his ambition to stand for re-election.

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