

International

DRC opposition chief claims win in tense election, rival cries foul

Vast central African country increasingly on edge

KINSHASA: Opposition leader Felix Tshisekedi was yesterday declared the victor of DR Congo's controversial presidential election in a surprise result swiftly denounced by his rival as a "coup". In a pre-dawn announcement, the election commission named Tshisekedi, son of the country's late veteran opposition leader, as provisional winner of the bitterly-contested December 30 vote.

At stake is political stewardship of the notoriously unstable central African nation which has never known a peaceful transition of power since independence from Belgium in 1960. Tshisekedi's apparent victory was greeted by celebrations at the headquarters of the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS), the country's oldest and largest opposition party which was founded by his father Etienne. The 55-year-old immediately pledged to work closely with current incumbent Joseph Kabila. "Today we should no longer see him as an adversary, but rather as a partner for democratic change in our country," he told supporters.

'Electoral coup'

But the result was immediately denounced by his opposition rival Martin Fayulu, the runner up, who slammed the announcement as "an electoral coup". French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said the declared outcome was "not consistent" with the results, saying that Fayulu appeared to have won.

With the vast central African country increasingly on edge over the long-delayed vote to replace Kabila, who has ruled the country with an iron fist since 2001, the United Nations

warned against any resort to violence. "The Secretary-General calls on all stakeholders to refrain from violence and to channel any eventual electoral disputes through the established institutional mechanisms," spokesman Stephane Dujarric said late Wednesday.

Kabila had been due to step down two years ago, but managed to cling on to power, sparking an escalating political crisis marked by widespread protests that were brutally repressed, leaving dozens of people dead. The vote finally took place at the end of December, pitting Kabila's handpicked successor Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary against Tshisekedi and Fayulu, a fiery orator who emerged from relative obscurity to take a front seat in the race.

'Ugly scam'

Election chief Corneille Nangaa declared Tshisekedi the winner with 38.57 percent of the vote, just ahead of Fayulu with 34.8 percent. Shadary came third with 23.8 percent. The announcement of an opposition win was a shock as many had expected the results to be stacked in Shadary's favour, prompting heavy international pressure on Kinshasa to respect the wishes of the electorate while the mammoth ballot count was under way. But yesterday's outcome was swiftly denounced by Fayulu as a sham.

"These results have nothing to do with the truth at the ballot box," he told Radio France International. "It's a real electoral coup, it's unbelievable," he said. "It's an ugly scam by Nangaa and his political cronies. "They have stolen the Congolese people's victory and the people will never accept that." France's Le Drian also said



KINSHASA: A supporter of the newly elected president of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Felix Tshisekedi, celebrates in the streets of Kinshasa. — AFP

Fayulu had apparently won, pointing to a parallel count by DR Congo's powerful Catholic Church which deployed more than 40,000 people to observe the vote.

Last week, CENCO, the body that represents the country's Catholic bishops, said it knew the outcome of the vote and urged the electoral commission to publish the results "in keeping with truth and justice". Although it did not name the winner, its announcement drew a sharp rebuke from the ruling coalition.

Calculated risk

Analysts described Tshisekedi's win as "highly surprising" but said it made sense in the context of DRC's political dynamics. "Kabila did

not want to risk announcing Shadary as the winner, which would have triggered violent protests and international condemnation. "Instead, he chose to split the opposition by creating a power-sharing deal with Tshisekedi," said Robert Besseling, executive director of risk consultancy EXX Africa.

"Kabila will be able to influence Tshisekedi, who now owes his ascendancy to power to Kabila's control of the electoral commission." He said the result was "starkly at odds" with CENCO's parallel vote tabulation. And in a country of 80 million where half the population are Catholic, CENCO's assessment that the outcome was rigged was likely to be widely accepted, he added. — AFP

Turkey will launch Syria offensive if US delays pullout

ISTANBUL: Turkey will launch an offensive against Syrian Kurdish forces if the United States delays the withdrawal of its troops from the war-torn country, the foreign minister said yesterday. "If the (pull-out) is put off with ridiculous excuses like Turks are massacring Kurds, which do not reflect the reality, we will implement this decision," Mevlut Cavusoglu told NTV television.

Turkey and the United States are at loggerheads over the future of Syrian Kurdish forces after US President Donald Trump made a surprise announcement last month to pull out 2,000 troops from Syria. Ahead of Trump's move, Turkish

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened to launch another operation in Syria targeting the US-backed Syrian Kurdish militia, which Turkey regards as a terrorist group.

Turkish officials had a tense meeting this week with Trump's national security adviser John Bolton in Ankara aimed at coordinating the pullout process. Erdogan — who has welcomed the pullout plan — accused Bolton of a "grave mistake" by demanding that Ankara provide assurances on the safety of the Kurdish fighters before Washington withdraws its troops.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who is on a regional tour, also said Wednesday that Turkey had committed to protecting Washington's Kurdish allies fighting the Islamic State in Syria. American forces have worked closely with the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia, seen by Ankara as a "terrorist offshoot" of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984. Cavusoglu said Turkey would go ahead with its incursion plan. — AFP

House arrest for minors held over Palestinian killing

JERUSALEM: Israeli authorities yesterday released to house arrest four of five Jewish minors held on suspicion of involvement in a fatal stoning attack on a Palestinian woman, lawyers and officials said. The arrests on December 30 were in connection with the killing of Aisha Rabi, who died after stones were thrown at the car she was travelling in with her family in the occupied West Bank on October 12.

Authorities did not confirm their detention until Sunday due to a gag order on details of the case while the investigation continued. The remand of the fifth suspect has been extended by another six days, Israel's domestic security agency Shin Bet said. The lawyers representing the minors argued that their release proved they were innocent.

"These youths, who had absolutely nothing to do with the event, should not have been arrested," said attorney Adi Kedar of Honenu, a right-wing legal aid organisation, vowing to work to have the fifth suspect released. The Shin Bet, which on Sunday announced an unspecified number of arrests

for "serious terrorist offences, including murder," rejected claims the youths were mistreated during their investigation.

The five, students at the Pri Haaretz religious seminary in the Rechelim settlement in the West Bank, were arrested "after intelligence efforts connecting them to the death of Rabi," a mother of nine, the Shin Bet said yesterday. The Shin Bet noted the four were released after it was decided "the investigation could continue while they were under house arrest and other limiting conditions."

It also warned of "ongoing efforts" to obstruct the course of the investigation, "including by disseminating information about the probe while slandering the Shin Bet". The fatal stoning took place near Rechelim, close to Rabi's village of Bidiya in the Israeli-occupied northern West Bank. Rabi was struck on the head in the attack and died later at a hospital in the city of Nablus. Her husband, who was driving the car at the time, escaped with minor injuries.

Palestinian witnesses and security sources cited by official Palestinian news agency Wafa said the stones were thrown by Israeli settlers. Israeli investigations into "Jewish terrorism" — as such cases are often referred to by Israeli media — are highly sensitive. Israeli authorities have been accused by rights activists of dragging their feet in such cases in comparison to investigations into Palestinian attacks, while far-right Israelis say suspects have undergone coercion and torture. — AFP