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By Sarah Graveline

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Congo opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi, center, walks, as he arrives at the airport in Kinshasa, Congo, Wednesday, July 27, 2016. (Source: AP Photo/John Bompengo.)

Sarah Graveline is a Research Associate in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

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By Hilary Matfess

The 27th African Union (AU) Summit, hosted in Kigali, Rwanda, drew to a close on July 18, 2016. Although the group failed to elect a [new President](#), the AU's mandate to promote regional integration was front and center at the conference. A new African Union passport was introduced and planning for the [Continental Free Trade Area \(CFTA\)](#) gained traction during the conference. These calls for enhanced regional integration are not new. For decades, greater intracontinental trade and investment have been goals, but little progress has been made despite the numerous bodies and agreements formed to advance this cause. In the aftermath of the summit, which revealed some structural weaknesses in the African Union, it is worth assessing the future of pan-African integration. [more...](#)



New African Union passport. (Source: Image adapted from James Oyesola, Twitter, <http://tinyurl.com/hemamux>, July 17, 2016.)

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A Sliding Election Generates Anger

Current political unrest within the DRC centers on indications that Congolese president Joseph Kabila intends to stay in power beyond the end of his second term in December. Kabila first assumed national leadership in 2001, following the assassination of his father, Laurent Kabila, and was formally elected in the nation's first freely held democratic election in 2006. Kabila was reelected in 2011, although the results were contested by the [opposition](#), and some observers argued the [elections lacked credibility](#).

Kabila is constitutionally forbidden from seeking a third term. In May, however, Congo's [Constitutional Court](#) announced that if the election failed to be held in time, the current president would remain in office until a new president is elected. [Observers](#) believe Kabila is actively working toward this outcome by obstructing elections from taking place. For example, in [January 2015](#), the ruling People's Party for Reconstruction and Democracy (PPRD) attempted to pass a law requiring that a new census take place before elections are held. Such a massive effort would certainly delay polling. In addition, the Congolese electoral commission (CENI), which is responsible for organizing the election, has repeatedly [increased](#) its estimate of the funding and time needed to organize polls, while undertaking almost no actual preparation activities.

A Fractured Opposition

This strategy of obstruction has created political unrest that is reenergizing the opposition. Immediately following the 2011 elections, opposition groups appeared weak. Tshisekedi, who had challenged Kabila for the presidency, was forced into [house arrest](#) after contesting the results. Ultimately, he left the country while members of his party, Union Pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (UDPS), accepted minority positions in parliament. The opposition remained quiet until September 2015, when seven party leaders within Kabila's coalition government published a [letter](#) urging Kabila to respect term limits. These leaders, who became known as [the G7](#), were fired from their government positions and, given Tshisekedi's absence, became the *de facto* voice of the opposition in the DRC.

Just days after the G7 published their letter, Moïse Katumbi, a longtime Kabila supporter and former governor of mineral-rich Katanga Province, publicly [broke with the president](#) by resigning from the PPRD and criticizing Kabila's attempt to prolong his term. On [May 4, 2016](#), Katumbi announced his own candidacy for president, with [support](#) from the G7. Less than a week later, he was [charged](#) with hiring armed mercenaries to overthrow the government. When Katumbi was summoned to court in Lubumbashi, the capital of Katanga Province, his supporters [rioted](#) in the streets.

On May 19, the government issued an [arrest warrant](#) for Katumbi, who quickly flew to [South Africa](#). The government issued a three-year prison [sentence in absentia](#), while Katumbi traveled to [London](#) and [Washington, DC](#), to lobby the international community.

Since Katumbi's departure, Congo's main opposition groups have sought to present a unified front. For example, in early June, the G7 and UDPS, along with Katumbi's Dynamic Opposition, met in Brussels to form an [alliance](#) known as *Rassemblement pour la défense des valeurs de la République*. But from its inception this alliance has shown signs of strain. Leaders from two key opposition groups, eastern Congo-based [Union pour la nation congolaise](#) (UPC) and [Mouvement de libération du Congo](#) (MLC), were not present at the Brussels meeting. In addition, Tshisekedi's popular reception in Kinshasa has strengthened his position while weakening Katumbi, who remains outside the DRC.

This shifting power balance between opposition groups seems to be further delaying the already slow progress toward elections. On June 24, the *Rassemblement* released a [communiqué](#), signed by Tshisekedi, announcing that it would not take part in African Union (AU)-led talks with the PPRD because it objected to the AU facilitator. This delay is helpful to the *Rassemblement*, ensuring Katumbi is not shut out of negotiations due to his absence, while also providing Tshisekedi time to continue to rally his supporters to leverage the PPRD for concessions. By jockeying for negotiating power at the expense of actual negotiations, however, the opposition may be contributing to the erosion of democratic norms in the DRC.

Conclusion

While the opposition squabbles, ordinary Congolese are suffering. Although the country has an estimated [\\$24 trillion](#) in untapped mineral resources, [64 percent](#) of the population lives in poverty. The state compounds this suffering as some government officials play a predatory role in citizens' daily lives. [Dr. Pierre Englebert](#), writing for the Atlantic Council, reported that "preliminary findings from an ongoing study of the real tax burden of the Congolese based on 2,400 households, indicate that the real tax rate faced by lower-income Congolese amounts to a stunning 40 percent of their wealth." On top of this, residents report that they must also pay a variety of menial bribes, fees, and fines, often created at the whim of civil servants or security officials in local areas.

The opposition's disorganization inspires little confidence that the situation for ordinary Congolese will soon change. As [observers](#) note, opposition groups in the DRC have a long history of speaking loudly while taking little action. Now, however, Congolese citizens are increasingly challenging this status quo. Over the past year, Congolese have registered their discontent with Kabila's government through a series of protests. To harness this dissatisfaction, opposition leaders need to overcome their existing rivalries in order to move the country forward toward the goal of political change.

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Previous Efforts and the Current State of Affairs

Trade among African nations is unusually low; the intraregional trade rate is just [18 percent](#), versus 69 percent in Europe and 52 percent in Asia. This low rate is not due to a lack of political infrastructure to facilitate trade—throughout the continent are [eight Regional Economic Communities \(RECs\)](#) designed to promote trade. Three of these RECs joined to form the [Tripartite Free Trade Area \(TFTA\)](#) in June 2015, a consolidation that includes 26 African countries and 57 percent of the sub-Saharan Africa's GDP. Despite the optimism that accompanied this union, on June 30, 2016, the countries failed to come to an agreement on tariff rate reduction and market access, raising questions about the [agreement's future](#).

In spite of the existence of the RECs and the TFTA and political endorsement of free trade, intra-African trade is hampered by protectionist trade [policies](#). Trade with non-African countries has been liberalized, but high tariffs on [agricultural products](#) imported from other African states are barriers to regional economic integration. It is estimated that the average African agricultural exporter faces a protection rate of [12.4 percent](#) within Africa but only 9.5 percent when exporting to non-African countries. Often, African agricultural commodities are designated as “sensitive products” and can be taxed protectively even under REC agreements. As a result of these policies, [nearly 85 percent](#) of African countries' imports of food and agricultural raw materials are from non-African countries.

Non-tariff barriers also impede trade. These include requirements for an abundance of paperwork at border crossings, the continental [deficit of physical infrastructure](#), and inefficiencies within national customs offices. These barriers raise costs significantly. Consider a 2010 UN estimate that “shipping a car [from Japan to Abidjan costs \\$1,500](#), while shipping that same vehicle from Addis Ababa to Abidjan would cost \$5,000,” because of the poor roads and transport infrastructure on the continent.

New Endeavors

The introduction of an African Union passport and the completion of the CFTA by 2017 are both aimed at reducing these administrative hurdles to pan-regional integration. The AU Commissioner for Trade and Industry, Fatima Haram Acyl, viewed the passport as a symbol of increasing continental linkages to advance economic development. As she stated, “[goods do not move themselves](#), they move with people.” The program was inaugurated with the granting of AU passports to Rwandan President Paul Kagame and Chadian President Idris Deby, but it is intended to expand beyond the continent's political elite.

Freedom of movement in Africa has been on the agenda since the [1991 Abuja Treaty](#); however, progress has been slow and uneven. At present, [just 13 African countries](#) allow all African citizens to enter without advance visas. Although the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) introduced an REC-wide passport in 2000, the process of implementation has taken longer than expected. Particularly tricky has been the scarcity of “not only passports but of [travel and identity documents altogether](#) in some countries in West Africa,” a shortcoming that is likely to also plague the AU’s passport program.

If the CFTA is successfully implemented, it would be the largest free-trade area in the world by number of participating countries. The market would be valued at more than [\\$3 trillion and contain more than 1 billion people](#) (with a population growth rate that portends [2 billion](#) people by 2050). The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) suggests that the CFTA could help promote industrialization in Africa and expand exports beyond raw agricultural products. Acyl suggests that the CFTA is more likely to succeed than previous efforts because it is “not starting from scratch,” but is building upon the institutions created by the RECs.

Conclusions

Both the AU passport program and the CFTA have subregional counterparts, the ECOWAS passport and the Tripartite Free Trade Agreement, respectively. The histories of those arrangements caution against overoptimism about the latest initiatives. Synchronizing the trade policies and bureaucratic capacities of the AU’s diverse member states, even absent political incentives to maintain protectionist policies, is a tall order. Further, even improving intraregional trade will not be a “[panacea for Africa’s industrial development](#).” While the latest efforts to promote pan-African integration have garnered public political support, their implementation will prove challenging. Improving intraregional trade requires not only the political courage to liberalize agricultural trade policies, but also significant investments in transnational transport networks and a reduction of non-tariff barriers. Although difficult, increasing intra-African trade is a worthy goal that would facilitate industrialization and economic development across the continent.

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