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Kabila's Return to the Congo war(s): New Ambitions and Old Constraints



Introduction

On the 12th of October, former Congolese president Joseph Kabila announced in M23-controlled Goma the creation of the *Front pour la refondation de la nation* (FRN), a new political-military movement bringing together the Rwanda-backed M23 rebellion and its political coalition, the *Alliance Fleuve Congo* (AFC). The FRN formally absorbs the AFC, and takes over its political and military structures as well as existing commitments, including the negotiations in Doha. It also makes more explicit its intention to end the rule of President Félix Tshisekedi, including through the use of force.

In the days following the announcement, Kinshasa took several security measures. On 14 October, President Tshisekedi reassessed military operations across the country with the defence council. The following day, foreign travel authorisations for senior military officers were suspended. Furthermore, defence minister Guy Kayombo Muadiamvita visited Lubumbashi and Kasumbalesa to inspect the army's 22nd military region, which covers the four provinces of the former Katanga. On 19 October, the region's commander, General Eddy Kapend, explicitly warned of the threat posed by Kabila's FRN and called on troops to remain vigilant.

Notwithstanding these measures, there are considerable uncertainties about what this new alliance can achieve, which we aim to discuss in this piece. The key questions are whether Kabila can expand the rebellion's political and territorial reach, how neighbouring countries will respond, what his leadership means for Congolese politics and prospects for dialogue, and how it will affect the balance of power within M23.

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Kabila's return, and the pressure to deliver

Kabila's relationship with the rebellion has been a central issue in Congolese politics for some time. Since 2024, the Tshisekedi government has repeatedly accused him of supporting the AFC/M23 and working with Rwanda to destabilise the country. This first led to the lifting of Kabila's immunity as senator for life, which paved the way for his prosecution, and ultimately by his conviction and death sentence (in absentia) by a military court in September 2025. In April 2026, the US imposed sanctions on him for his role in AFC/M23.

If anything, Kabila's formal leadership of this new rebellion simply confirms what many had already suspected about his links to AFC/M23. The key question however is the extent to which his leadership will make a difference. Kabila has raised the stakes for himself. He has repeatedly signalled that he intends to act, carried out political consultations in eastern DRC, and now publicly placed himself at the head of a rebel group. At this point, simply assuming leadership is not enough. He needs to show that the FRN can achieve something the AFC could not, and that it is more than a rebranded AFC/M23. His overall credibility will depend on the extent to which he'll be able to 'deliver' – which can mean a number of things: attracting politicians, encouraging defections from security services, building alliances with other opposition movements, or perhaps most importantly: expanding the rebellion's geographical reach.

The new alliance is therefore also a considerable gamble for Kabila. His association with an armed rebellion backed by Rwanda may strengthen his position within the armed movement, but it can also further damage his reputation in the DRC: openly allying yourself with Rwanda's involvement in the country isn't necessarily the most popular move in the country. Moreover, the longer the rebellion remains confined to its existing strongholds, the more difficult it will become for Kabila to present himself as the leader of a national movement capable of replacing Tshisekedi. In order to establish itself on the national political landscape in DRC, Joseph Kabila's movement will have to take decisive short-term actions to prove that it is a force capable of changing the country's political and security dynamics. It therefore remains to be seen what he will do in the short term.

The question of Katanga

One of the most important questions concerns the rebellion's geographical ambitions, and particularly its intentions towards Katanga. Given that the rebellion's northward expansion is blocked by Ugandan troops, an expansion southward – via Uvira and Kalemie – would make sense.

Kabila has longstanding connections to the former Katanga province. Although he was born in South Kivu, his political base has historically been closely associated with Katanga, where his family and political networks have exercised considerable influence. Katanga occupies a central place in Congo's political economy: it's the heart of industrial mining and the most important taxation base. In 2024, copper and cobalt, whose production is concentrated largely in the region, accounted for more than 90% of the value of the country's exports. It's no exaggeration to say that control over Katanga can go a long way towards determining who controls the DRC. As such, any serious threat to the government's control over these areas would have major financial and political consequences for Kinshasa.

While there are signs of dissatisfaction with the Tshisekedi regime in parts of Katanga, including over the management of the region's mining wealth, it remains to be seen whether this dissatisfaction can be translated into support for an armed movement – particularly one which is supported by Rwanda. Kabila will therefore have to convince potential supporters in Katanga that the FRN serves their interests, despite its close association with Rwanda. This may prove difficult, particularly if the movement continues to be perceived as operating under Kigali's influence.

Kabila's regional ambitions

Kabila's ability to expand the rebellion's political reach will also depend heavily on the response of neighbouring countries.

For all its territorial gains, M23 continues to face a fundamental problem of political legitimacy. Rwanda's extensive support plays a role in this: the latest Group of Expert reports estimated between 14,000 to 18,000 Rwandan troops in support of M23. This has limited its appeal within Congo and complicated its relations with other governments in the region.

While Kabila's involvement gives Kigali greater scope to present the rebellion as an internal Congolese political struggle – a framing Kigali consistently has been using – this is unlikely to change much in the way the rebellion is perceived within and outside of Congo.

Over the past eighteen months, Kabila has travelled extensively across SADC countries – in a move to rebuild his regional political relationships and convince neighbouring governments that Tshisekedi is unable to

manage Congo's political and security crises; with Kabila presenting himself as a more reliable alternative.

The question is if this will work – particularly given Rwanda's role in the rebellion, and these countries strained relation with Rwanda, ever since the second Congo War. Angola – which Kabila visited in December 2025 – will be especially important: it has longstanding interests in Congo, and shares an extensive border with the country. Angola has historically been highly sensitive to instability across its borders and has repeatedly intervened in Congolese affairs when it considered its security interests threatened. And while Lourenco might have become frustrated with Tshisekedi's approach to the conflict, there are no signs Luanda would intervene in the conflict.

The creation of the FRN also raises questions about Uganda, another major player in the conflict whose involvement has received considerably less attention than Rwanda's, despite its substantial military presence in eastern Congo, particularly in Ituri and North Kivu. Uganda's relation with M23 has been particularly ambiguous – having allowed a degree of passive support to M23, at least in the initial years of M23's re-emergence. Muhoozi Kaineraiguba, the head of Uganda's armed forces and son of President Museveni, did tweet in April 2025 that he "will not let Joseph Kabila become a President of DRC again! You can forget about that"; at other times accusing him of having supported the ADF rebel group. Much will depend on whether the FRN attempts to expand into areas where Uganda maintains substantial interests (and where it's currently present).

Another important external actor whose reaction and policy choices will be important are the United States. So far, the US played an important role in pressuring M23 to withdraw from two strategic areas: Walikale in March 2025 and then Uvira in January 2026. The US also levied a range of sanctions, most notably against Kabila for his support to M23 – even before he made his connections with M23 formal; as well against the RDF and its four most senior commanders. So far, US pressure has helped constrain Rwanda's and M23's territorial ambitions, particularly attempts to expand beyond the areas under rebel control when the Washington Accords were signed. The FRN's broader territorial and political ambitions will now put both Washington's willingness to intervene and its leverage over the conflict's main actors to a renewed test.

The limits of Kabila's comeback: political composition and the figure Kabila

There are also important weaknesses in the new movement's political composition. Despite its claims to represent a national alternative, the FRN still remains heavily associated with political and military actors from eastern Congo and with Rwanda's regional networks. Without attracting a broader political base – from other parts of the country, or other opposition parties – it'd be hard, at least for now, to have broader political appeal. Kabila has so far struggled to rally the opposition's leading figures. When he launched the *Sauvons la RDC* political platform, attendance was limited to former prime minister Matata Ponyo and figures from his own FCC coalition. Opposition heavyweights such as Moïse Katumbi, Martin Fayulu, Delly Sesanga and Jean-Marc Kabund stayed away and adopted a more political – rather than military – approach to confront Tshisekedi. Now that his link to the rebellion is official, Kabila has become even more toxic. Within days of the FRN's launch, several of his allies resigned from his party PPRD or publicly distanced themselves from him, including former human right minister Marie-Ange Mushobekwa. This also is out of fear of repression: the majority of those who distanced themselves from Kabila live in Kinshasa.

Another problem is the figure of Kabila himself. In the current national context, marked by serious democratic backsliding, a 'new Kabila' might have stood some chance of gaining political acceptance. Yet Kabila remains closely associated with the authoritarianism of his final years in power. Whatever his attempts to revive his earlier identity as a military figure emerging from armed struggle – who once said "he'll die from a bullet in his head" – his political legacy remains too tainted by his later years in office for him to credibly present himself as an alternative to the current regime. Strikingly, in a recent poll by Ebuteli, only 3% of Congolese considered him their favourite politician.

There is also something remarkable about Kabila's political trajectory, which has now come almost full circle. In 1996, Kabila served as a military commander in the Rwanda-backed AFDL rebellion that brought his father to power. Two years later, following the breakdown of relations between Laurent Kabila and Rwanda, he was a major general in the Congolese army's senior command, first pushing out Rwanda, and eventually fighting another Rwanda-backed rebellion. As president, he confronted the CNDP and later M23, which his government defeated in 2013 with the support of the UN Force Intervention Brigade. Thirteen years later, he has placed himself at the head of a movement built around that same M23 rebellion

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(with more or less the same key-actors), again backed by Rwanda. Such changes in political and military alliances are not unusual in Congolese politics. Yet they take on a different significance when they involve a former president who spent nearly two decades in office, including years spent fighting the very rebellion he now leads.

Kabila's criticism of Tshisekedi also raises questions about his own political legacy. Much of his criticism, particularly concerning democratic backsliding and political repression, is warranted. Yet Kabila himself played a role in shaping the political order he now condemns. Following the 2018 elections, Kabila's camp reached a political understanding with Tshisekedi, who was subsequently declared president despite evidence pointing to Martin Fayulu's victory. The arrangement allowed Kabila to leave office while retaining considerable influence over parliament, key government ministries and the security services. Tshisekedi eventually broke with Kabila's coalition and consolidated his own power, but the political bargain that facilitated his accession was one in which Kabila had a direct stake. His current criticism leaves remarkably little room for his own role in that transition. Indeed, it is difficult to look at almost any major political development in Congo over the past three decades without encountering Kabila, whether as a military officer, president, influential former head of state, and now head of a rebellion.

This return to armed rebellion also challenges a central part of Kabila's claimed political legacy. He and his supporters have long portrayed him as the president who ended the Second Congo War, helped establish constitutional democracy and eventually handed over power to an opposition leader. Whatever the limitations of that narrative, his decision to lead a rebellion against the government represents a striking reversal for someone who once presented himself as a guarantor of Congo's constitutional order.

What does this mean for Congolese politics and national dialogue?

The creation of the FRN comes at a particularly difficult moment for Congolese domestic politics: Tshisekedi's presidency has been characterised by democratic backsliding, such as the proposed change of the constitution to extend presidential term limits, and the crackdown on opposition. Calls for a national political dialogue have consequently gained prominence, as a way to resolve the crisis in Eastern DRC. While these were formally launched in August, actual negotiations have not yet begun. With Kabila presiding over the FRN, would he be included in such a dialogue? Including Kabila would be controversial, particularly among those who see him as responsible for supporting Rwanda's intervention. Excluding him could limit the prospects of reaching an agreement capable of ending the fighting.

Moreover, the location and mediation of a national dialogue will also become increasingly contentious: holding such negotiations in Kinshasa would present obvious difficulties for Kabila and other opposition figures who face prosecution or fear arrest. Angola has previously advocated political dialogue as part of its efforts to resolve the Congolese crisis, and Lourenço could again become an important figure in efforts to bring the parties together.

The alternative is a further military escalation, with both sides increasingly convinced that they can improve their negotiating position through force. This has de facto happened since the capture of Goma, which led to a direct dialogue between the Congolese government and M23 (through the Doha process) – something which Kinshasa had previously refused to do.

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More information

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A new balance of power within M23?

Kabila's appointment also has major implications for the internal organisation of the rebellion.

The AFC/M23 coalition has never been a completely unified political and military movement, in which the relationship with Kigali was an important factor. Differences between major actors in the coalition have frequently produced tensions, even as Rwandan military support has allowed the rebellion to achieve considerable territorial gains.

M23 leader Sultani Makenga is central to this: his relationship with Kigali has not always been straightforward; and these tensions have become particularly relevant amid recent reports of internal disputes and challenges to Makenga's position.

The AFC's political leadership has faced different constraints. Corneille Nangaa, the former head of Congo's electoral commission, became the most prominent civilian figure in the rebellion after becoming AFC's leader in December 2023. His appointment helped give M23 a broader political identity, presenting it as part of a national movement opposed to Tshisekedi. Yet, his position has always been largely symbolic, with limited power, both due to its lack of serious backing by Kigali, and had both little budget and maneuvouring space (with Makenga having serious leverage over him). Recent reports for example showed that Théo Binamungu, a key advisor to Nangaa, was imprisoned by Makenga.

Kabila's arrival changes this equilibrium. As a former president with established political and military networks, and particularly through his direct relationship with Rwanda, Kabila occupies a much stronger position than Nangaa. Through Kigali's support, his leadership gives him influence over both the political and military wings of the movement. This might have a complicated effect on M23, and particularly for Makenga. Kabila's position, combined with Rwanda's backing, gives him substantial leverage over the military leadership. This creates the possibility of further internal tensions, particularly if M23 commanders feel that their influence is being reduced or that political decisions are being imposed on them. It could also sharpen tensions over the long-term objectives of the rebellion, with M23 less inclined to expand beyond its strongholds in North and South Kivu, while others, particularly Kabila, pursue the broader goal of regime change in Kinshasa. Rwanda's role will be decisive in managing these tensions; and it remains to be seen how their objectives will coincide with Kabila's ambitions.

For now, the announcement has given the rebellion a more prominent political leader and a more explicit national ambition. Whether Kabila can turn that ambition into a wider political and military movement remains an open question.