

Bishops Strike Deal With Politicians to Forbid President From Third Term

Congo's influential Catholic Church urged politicians on Friday to renegotiate a deal struck last week to ensure a presidential election is held next year and President Joseph Kabila is forbidden from standing for a third term.

Democratic Republic of Congo's ruling coalition and part of the opposition have agreed to delay the vote from this November to April 2018, citing logistical and budgetary difficulties enrolling millions of voters.

But the vast central African country's main opposition bloc has denounced the accord as a pretext to allow Kabila to cling to power beyond the end of his mandate in December.

The pact removed language from an earlier draft that would have barred any changes to the constitution before the next election, leaving room for Kabila to change the constitution so that he can run again, his opponents say.

The government denies these accusations.

"It is imperative that it be clearly mentioned in the consensus ... that the current president of the republic not stand for a third term," the National Episcopal Conference of Congo said in a statement.

It added that a transition period after Kabila's mandate expires on Dec. 19 should not last beyond the end of 2017.

In a sign of simmering tensions, 12 young democracy activists were detained on Friday at a sit-in in the capital Kinshasa to protest the accord, a police spokesman said. He said they had violated a citywide ban on protests imposed after dozens died

in anti-government demonstrations last month.

Opposition leaders have promised further protests to oust Kabila from power, raising fears of a return to widespread violence in a country where millions have died in civil conflicts since the 1990s and rebel groups continue to wreak anarchy in eastern regions.

The Congolese church has long been regarded as a moral compass in a country where confidence in other institutions is weak. More than 40 percent of Congolese identify as Catholic.

However, the church retreated from its more outspoken calls last year that Kabila step down in 2016 in order to try to broker a compromise that averts further bloodshed. {eo}

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