V. Central Africa

After a spectacular attempt by a rebel coalition to capture Chad’s capital N’Djaména by force in February, there was a relative decrease of violent encounters in this country and in the neighbouring Central African Republic (CAR). However, the upsurge in violent combat between renegade General Nkunda and the official security forces in eastern DR Congo meant that this was not at all a peaceful year for the sub-region. Economically, 2008 was a reasonably good year at the macro-level for the whole of Central Africa, with only Chad lagging behind. Yet the cost of living increased dramatically in the first months practically everywhere. Politically, most countries experienced no major change: the long-term presidents in most countries adapted their strategies to hold on to power, as did the relative newcomers in CAR and DR Congo.
Democracy and Elections

The only country of the sub-region to hold nationwide elections was Equatorial Guinea, where, on 4 May, legislative elections took place. Unsurprisingly, the ‘Partido Democrático de Guinea Ecuatorial’ (PDGE) of President Obiang Nguema, in alliance with nine smaller parties, won a landslide victory, taking 99 of the 100 seats in the National Assembly. The ‘Convergencia para la Democracia Social’ (CPDS), the only noteworthy opposition party, lost one of the two seats it had won in the preceding elections. This election proved – if proof was necessary – that the country lacked even the façade of democracy.

Partial senatorial elections were held in Congo, with the presidential alliance securing 33 of the 42 seats. Seven independent candidates were elected and only two seats went to a regular party, attesting to the weakness of Congolese opposition parties.

In Cameroon, President Biya initiated a change to the constitution that allowed him to stand for another term in the elections scheduled for 2011 and rule for another five years. He had acceded to power in 1982 and was thus one of the longest-serving heads of state in Africa (eclipsed by only Omar Bongo and Obiang Nguema in neighbouring Gabon and Equatorial Guinea). With a safe majority in parliament to secure this fundamental change, Biya did not opt for a referendum. When the chairman of the foreign affairs committee in the National Assembly stood up against those constitutional amendments, he was intimidated and later resigned his post. The National Assembly speaker subsequently tried to curtail the rights of this member of parliament.

Human Rights

Certain political killings stood out. In DR Congo, a leading politician from the ‘Mouvement pour la Libération du Congo’ (MLC), Daniel Boteti, was shot by elements of the presidential guard, while in Chad the leading opposition figure Ibni Oumar was believed to have been killed after he disappeared following his arrest and torture by security forces.

Human rights took a turn for the worse in Cameroon. In January, the governor of Littoral province banned all public demonstrations until further notice. Spontaneous demonstrations in February in reaction to price hikes for essential goods, shortages of energy and water supplies as well as the planned constitutional change to allow Biya to stand again for re-election were met with the widespread use of physical violence by the government (40–100 deaths, 1,600 arrests). Popular singer Lapiro de Mbanga received a three year sentence, while others were pardoned by Biya. Prison guards killed at least 17 rioting prisoners in June at New Bell prison in Douala. Another spectacular case was the arrest of Paul Eric Kingué, mayor of Njombé-Penja and member of the ruling party. He had asked the local French-owned banana plantation company to pay the business tax it had evaded for the last 30 years and immediately got into trouble. When the wages of the plantation