

23 October 2026

## The Impact of Joseph Kabila's political return on SADC – EAC conflict mediation in the DRC: What SADC should do to preserve peace?

By Owen Dhliwayo

On 12 October 2026, the former DRC President Joseph Kabila announced the formation of the Front pour la Refondation de la Nation (FRN). This is a new politico – military coalition replacing the AFC/M23, with Nangaa, Bisimwa, Makenga and Kaniki as his deputies. This follows his September 2025 death sentence in absentia for treason and alleged support for AFC/M23.

Kabila's return shifts the conflict from a peripheral rebellion to a national legitimacy contest, directly undermining the merged Luanda – Nairobi mediation framework. For SADC, it poses three immediate risks: mediation fragmentation, FARDC [defection](#) and regional escalation with Rwanda. This demands a shift from military support to political mediation, a posture prioritized in the recently published UN Secretary General's [Review on the Future of All forms of UN Peace Operations](#).

Kabila's return was driven by [converging factors](#): (i) the collapse of the 2019 – 2020 power sharing coalition, (ii) Tshisekedi's post 2024 constitutional reform agenda perceived as a third term bid and (iii) the judicial closure of the political space that removed incentives for compromise. This coincides with a security vacuum in eastern DRC after the withdrawal of EACRF (2023) and SAMIDRC (2025), making Goma a viable capital – in – exile.

Brooke-Holland describes DRC as experiencing neo-patrimonial dynamics where power is anchored in [patronage networks](#). This is a conflict driven by political rivalries, land, mineral wealth and foreign intervention, making the DRC one of the SADC's most unstable states.

### Impact on SADC – EAC Mediation

The formation of the FRN creates an immediate problem for the ongoing mediation and existing agreements. Kabila and the FNR becomes a new conflict actor in the Doha process, the US mediation and the merged Luanda – Nairobi framework. This forces a renegotiation of who constitutes a legitimate party to the peace process, which risks reopening settled provisions on ceasefire, disarmament and political inclusion thereby complicating consensus on implementation

The FRN further overstretches SADC's limited diplomatic, financial and military bandwidth. The formation fundamentally [alters](#) the conflict narrative. AFCV/M23 was framed as a Rwanda – backed, Tutsi – led rebellion with a limited national agenda. However, the FRN now presents itself as a national movement underpinned by the leadership of a former president. SADC will now have to shift the narrative from defending the DRC sovereignty against external aggression, to defending the DRC from internal rebellion, yet many Heads of State have historical ties to Kabila. They will now face political pressure to treat FRN as a political actor rather than a purely negative force.

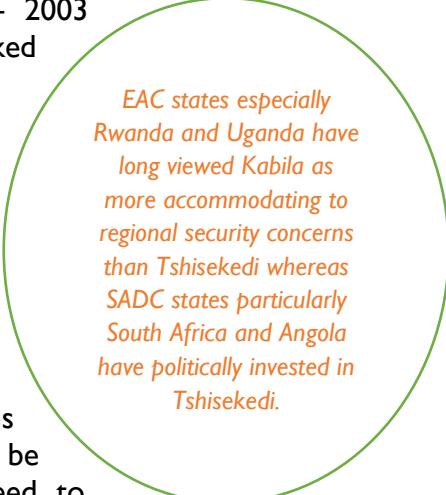
For Kabila, the September 2025 death sentence and lifting of immunity removed incentives for compromise by eliminating a legal political pathway back. Thus, creating a total spoiler where consolidated armed rebellion offered a better survival strategy than negotiation. The existing multiple concurrent mediation initiatives marked by [competing mediator](#) interests and poor strategic coordination will be further complicated by Kabila's return.

EAC states especially Rwanda and Uganda have long viewed Kabila as more accommodating to regional security concerns than Tshisekedi whereas SADC states particularly South Africa and Angola have politically invested in Tshisekedi. Therefore, Kabila's political return has the potential to invert alignments, recreating the 1998 – 2003 scenario where SADC and EAC member states backed opposing sides.

### **An Unavoidable Peace Spoiler?**

The FRN transforms the eastern DRC conflict from a localized rebellion into a national legitimacy crisis by creating a new, unavoidable actor in an already fragmented mediation system.

The FRN outfit reinforces the view that DRC's problems are fundamentally internal. That said, Kabila cannot be avoided. He needs to be engaged and there is a need to immediately harmonise Doha, US and the Luanda – Nairobi processes into a single contact group with a common position on the FRN's status. It is also important to move from a binary "negative force vs state" view to an agreed tiered actor mapping, which treats the FRN as a political – military actor with grievances to be negotiated. This is essential for the prioritization of political solutions and the implementation of a political agreement.



*EAC states especially Rwanda and Uganda have long viewed Kabila as more accommodating to regional security concerns than Tshisekedi whereas SADC states particularly South Africa and Angola have politically invested in Tshisekedi.*

Any mediation process must address President Tshisekedi's [post-2024 constitutional reform](#) agenda as a way of creating constitutional safeguards. This, however, does not stop the FRN's grievance narrative to be radicalized. At the same time, it is important to endeavor filling the security vacuum in Goma to prevent extremist recruitment through basic services such as DDR community outreach and inter-community dialogue sessions. The FRN control of the mineral-rich border areas deepens the political economy of the war. Through mediation, it is of paramount importance to negotiate mineral traceability and revenue-sharing provisions early to prevent the FRN consolidation.

### **What should SADC do?**

SADC needs to preserve its credibility as a guarantor of constitutional order while avoiding being trapped as a party to the DRC war. Specifically, the regional body must:

- **Reframe SADC's role from military guarantor to political mediator** - Article 11 of the SADC Protocol on Politics, Defense and Security Cooperation prioritises the use of peaceful methods to address and resolve regional crises through preventive diplomacy, negotiation, conciliation and mediation, the conflict resolution principles that reinforce the primacy of political solutions. It is, therefore, in SADC's place to proactively engage both President Tshisekedi and Joseph Kabila to direct their conflict to a negotiating table rather than focusing on military solutions.

The SADC Summit must urgently mandate a formal strategic review of SAMIDRC with a clause and transition plan towards a political mediation mission. Most critically, SADC must issue a communique explicitly stating support for a negotiated settlement inclusive of all DRC's stakeholders with an underlying reallocation of part of the SAMIDRC budget to fund the SADC Mediation Support Unit for shuttle diplomacy.

- **Secure regional de – escalation (the primacy of politics)** - Preventive measures must be activated by deploying political envoys to Kabila and FRN, Rwanda with security guarantees and President Tshisekedi with constitutional guarantees administratively operationalized through the Panel of Elders (PoE) and Mediation Reference Group (MRG). The SADC PoE should deploy a confidential envoy to DRC with security guarantees that provide assurance of safe passage and protection from arbitrary prosecution for Kabila as a precondition for dialogue with a strong message on the need for return to constitutional politics and not armed rebellion.

## Conclusion

Joseph Kabila's return poses serious challenges to eastern DRC and the country's peace processes. This is principally because the FRN formation transforms the conflict from a localized insurgency into a national succession crisis with regional implications. Treating FRN as a rebranded AFC/M23 will culminate in the error of treating political conflicts as purely military problems. Notably, Kabila's political return is not opportunistic but structural, it is driven by the collapse of the 2019–2020 power sharing coalition coupled with the President Tshosekedi's constitutional reform agenda, the September 2025 death sentence judgement and the security vacuum in Goma after the withdrawal of the EACRF and SAMIDRC. These developments brought to the fore an understanding that the window for a military solution has closed. The emerging confrontation requires operationalising the primacy of political solutions as enshrined in [Article 11](#) of the SADC Protocol on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation and echoed in the UN Secretary General's Review on the Future of All Forms of Peace Operations.

Written by **Owen Dhlwayo**, for the Southern Africa Centre for Mediation and Extremism Prevention (SACMEP).

For more information and collaborative engagements contact: [info@sacmep.org](mailto:info@sacmep.org) | <https://sacmep.org/>