

Congo's Mining Heartland Faces the Threat of Partition Again

written by Melissa (Mel) Sanderson | October 16, 2026

The great heart of Africa is poised to plunge again into darkness and chaos.

Last week, former President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) Joseph Kabila, living in self-imposed exile in South Africa, made a public announcement that garnered wide attention and alarm among Congolese and other Africans but went largely unnoticed by the broader world.

In a scathing and not entirely untrue declaration, Kabila decried the outrageous corruption of sitting President Félix Tshisekedi's government, pointing to scarcity of goods, inflation and soaring prices for key commodities such as food and fuel, which are causing widespread misery for average Congolese. On a much more hypocritical note, he sounded the alarm over Tshisekedi's possible intentions, conveyed in a series of statements and actions, to prolong his hold on the presidency beyond the constitutional limit of 2028. (Kabila himself had been accused of intending exactly the same at the end of his elected tenure.) He especially condemned Tshisekedi's failure to regain control of eastern Congo's Kivu provinces, much of which fell in early 2025 to the M23 rebels backed by neighboring Rwanda, whose President Paul Kagame has long coveted the mineral-rich region.

What to that point sounded like an opening public relations gambit for a presidential run then pivoted sharply to something much more threatening.

Perhaps seduced by nostalgia or financial blandishments, Joseph

Kabila appears to have decided to march down the road trodden by his father, former Congolese President Laurent-Désiré Kabila, and align his interests with those of Rwanda. Kinshasa already counts him among its enemies: in September 2025, a military court [sentenced](#) him to death in absentia for treason, following his visit to M23-held Goma.

Joseph, who grew up in exile in Tanzania after the family fled there following one of Laurent-Désiré's failed uprisings, may be considering how his father's path to power rested on an alliance with Rwanda – then, as now, led by Paul Kagame. Publicly motivated by a desire to rid Congo (then Zaire) of the kleptocratic President Mobutu, but privately driven by greed and the lust for power, Laurent-Désiré Kabila joined forces with Rwanda and Uganda in 1996 to lead a rebellion that swept west from the Kivu provinces. The campaign succeeded with remarkable speed: Mobutu fled in May 1997, and Kabila was installed as President.

But Kabila soon turned on his patrons. When he ordered Rwandan troops out of Congo in 1998, Rwanda and Uganda backed a new rebellion against him, and their forces reached the outskirts of the capital, Kinshasa. Only the intervention of Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia saved his government, beginning the prolonged conflict known as Africa's World War.

So now, it appears that Joseph believes he can rally the former Katanga province (divided since 2015 into four provinces: Haut-Katanga, Lualaba, Haut-Lomami and Tanganyika) to join the two Kivu provinces, large parts of which have been held by M23 since early 2025, to form a lucrative and strategic bloc in eastern Congo, effectively formalizing a partition of the country. Greater Katanga is the source of most of Congo's mining revenue, as it hosts international companies operating copper and cobalt mines. This more limited goal might be achievable, but both

Kagame and Kabila may have ambitions reaching beyond eastern Congo.

Kabila appears blind to the fact that his actions now lend credence to accusations leveled against him during his presidency, including that he went easy on Rwanda-backed rebels because he himself is Rwandan (an unsubstantiated rumor).

The spectre of partition, however, has haunted Congolese for decades, and almost became a reality during the war, when Uganda and its allies effectively controlled the north of Congo, Rwanda the east, and a faltering Kinshasa was left with the central and western areas. Even Angola, Kabila's wartime ally, later sent troops into border villages in the diamond-producing Kahemba territory during a 2007–08 boundary dispute.

Among his former government officials and allies, Joseph counts some formidable political – and even military – potential partners who may be desperate enough to roll the coup dice with him.

This is a serious threat at a precarious moment. Trouble is already under way elsewhere on the continent, where Ethiopia's disputes with its neighbors, including Egypt over the Nile, threaten to widen. A war in Congo could further damage prospects for the continent just as Western interest in African states was mounting in the chase for critical minerals – interest that helped produce the US-brokered peace [agreement](#) between the DRC and Rwanda in June 2025.

If Joseph is being seduced by memories – some true, some false – he would be well advised also to remember the fate of his father. Laurent-Désiré Kabila was assassinated in 2001 – on the orders of Rwanda's Paul Kagame, many believe – after he tried to exert the authority he thought he had as Congo's President and forgot who held the real power behind his rise.

The path to solving the DRC's problems and securing peace and prosperity for its people has never lain in violence and coups. Sadly, history's lessons may once again be ignored if Kabila continues down what appears to be his chosen path.