According to the constitution, the president is chief of state and is elected for a maximum of two five-year terms. The prime minister is head of government, and is formally appointed by the president.

Former president Joseph Kabila overStayed his constitutional mandate by two years, leaving the DRC without an elected head of government for a period starting in late 2016. A Constitutional Court ruling that year allowed him to remain in office until a successor was in place, but elections were repeatedly postponed by the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI), despite mediation effects by the Roman Catholic Church’s National Episcopal Conference of Congo (CENCO), until late December 2018.

In January 2019, Félix Tshisekedi was declared the victor of the preceding month’s presidential election with 38.6 percent of the vote, defeating Martin Fayulu of the Lamuka (Wake Up) coalition, who secured 34.8 percent according to CENI. Tshisekedi, a leader of the Course for Change (CACH) coalition, was believed to have secured the presidency via a backroom deal—meant to preserve political influence for Kabila—under which he allied himself with the Kabila-led Common Front for Congo (FCC). The FCC had previously backed Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary, who received 23.9 percent of the vote as the People’s Party for Reconstruction and Democracy (PPRD) candidate. Several opposition candidates were barred from competing in the poll.

The polls were heavily criticized due to voter suppression and electoral fraud. Observers from the Catholic Church and the civil society coalition Synergy of Citizen Election Observation Missions reported massive fraud and irregularities. CENCO reported widespread ballot-validation procedure violations, large vote-counting discrepancies, and confusion over the locations of vote-counting centers. CENCO’s tally—reportedly reviewed by multiple independent auditors—supported their contention that Fayulu won 60 percent of the vote. Election observers were denied access to polling stations in some cases, and foreign observers were not allowed to participate.

CENI only released a national tally, impeding observers in their efforts to determine where tampering occurred. However, 1.2 million voters were disenfranchised when citizens in three opposition areas—Beni territory and Butembo in North Kivu Province and Yumbi in Mai-Ndombe Province—were prevented from voting, officially for security and public health concerns; residents viewed the decision as politically motivated. Official results reported a margin of victory that was a little over half the number of voters disenfranchised in opposition areas.

In May 2019, Sylvestre Ilunga Ilukamba, a Kabila ally, was appointed prime minister, and remained in his post at the end of 2020.