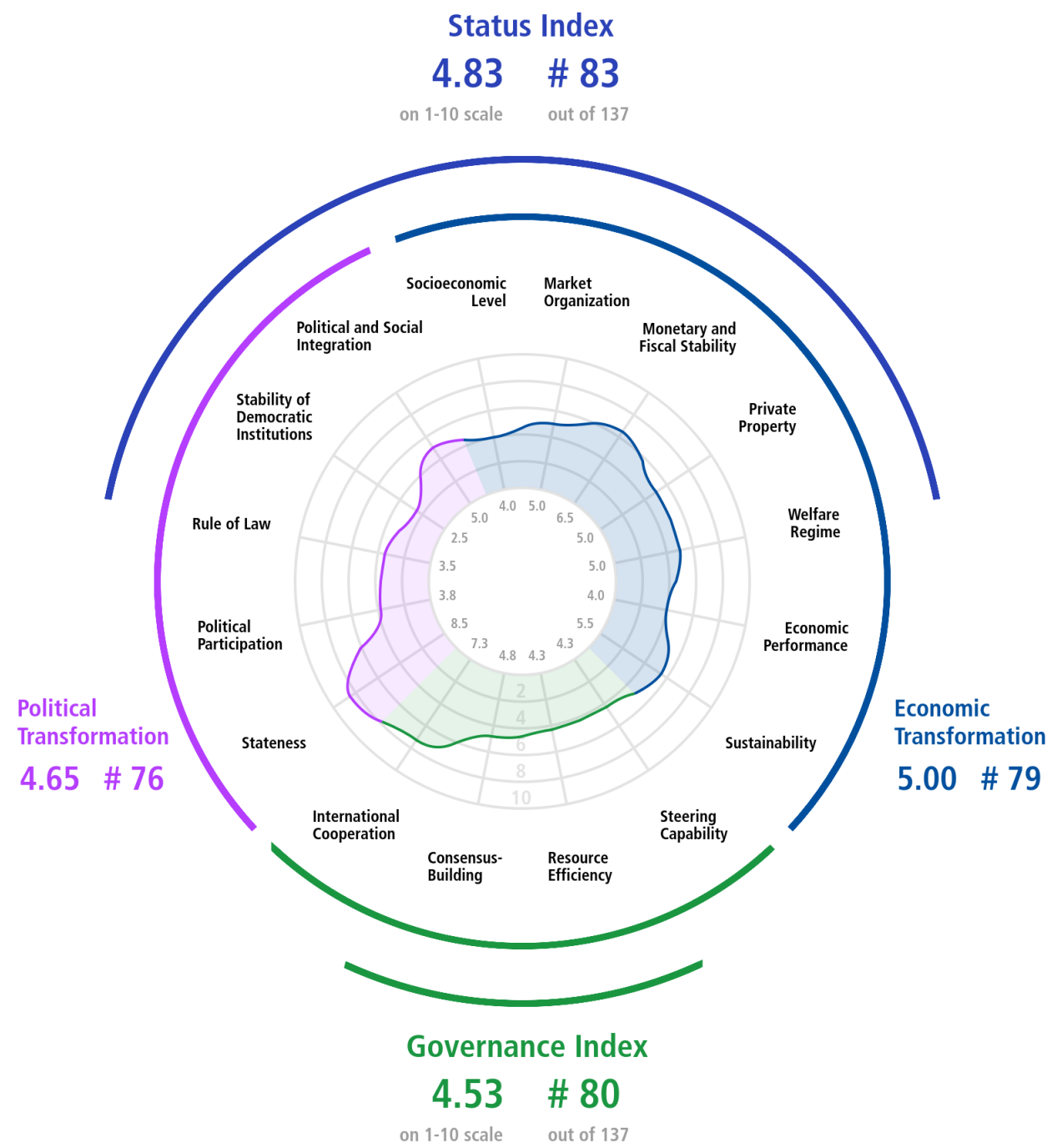


# Gabon



This report is part of the **Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2022**. It covers the period from February 1, 2019 to January 31, 2021. The BTI assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of governance in 137 countries. More on the BTI at <https://www.bti-project.org>.

Please cite as follows: Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2022 Country Report – Gabon. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

## **Contact**

Bertelsmann Stiftung  
Carl-Bertelsmann-Strasse 256  
33111 Gütersloh  
Germany

### **Sabine Donner**

Phone +49 5241 81 81501  
[sabine.donner@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:sabine.donner@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

### **Hauke Hartmann**

Phone +49 5241 81 81389  
[hauke.hartmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:hauke.hartmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

### **Claudia Härterich**

Phone +49 5241 81 81263  
[claudia.haerterich@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:claudia.haerterich@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

### **Sabine Steinkamp**

Phone +49 5241 81 81507  
[sabine.steinkamp@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:sabine.steinkamp@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

**Key Indicators**

Population	M	<b>2.2</b>	HDI	<b>0.703</b>	GDP p.c., PPP \$	<b>15191</b>
Pop. growth <sup>1</sup>	% p.a.	<b>2.4</b>	HDI rank of 189	<b>119</b>	Gini Index	<b>38.0</b>
Life expectancy	years	<b>66.5</b>	UN Education Index	<b>0.650</b>	Poverty <sup>3</sup>	% <b>11.2</b>
Urban population	%	<b>90.1</b>	Gender inequality <sup>2</sup>	<b>0.525</b>	Aid per capita \$	<b>53.7</b>

Sources (as of December 2021): The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2021 | UNDP, Human Development Report 2020. Footnotes: (1) Average annual growth rate. (2) Gender Inequality Index (GII). (3) Percentage of population living on less than \$3.20 a day at 2011 international prices.

## Executive Summary

During the 2019–2021 review period, Gabon has been beset by a series of major blows, starting with a failed coup d'état against ailing President Ali Bongo, who suffered a stroke in late 2018, and remained out of the country for much of the following year convalescing in England and then Morocco. Next came the COVID-19 pandemic, which shut down the economy, as the government introduced confinement and lockdown measures. As a result of the pandemic-induced reduction in demand and ensuing economic crisis, oil prices fell to around \$40 per barrel, which cut deep into Gabon's public finances, with government revenue heavily dependent on oil, manganese and timber exports.

After inheriting power from his father, the late Omar Bongo, Ali Bongo ran the country much the way his father had done: cooperating with foreign investors and multinational corporations, using rents from the extractive industries to maintain clientelistic patronage systems and buttress his regime, which maintained the formal appearance of electoral democracy behind the thin veneer of the Parti Démocratique Gabonaise's (PDG) single-party rule. Since Ali Bongo ruled in the neo-patrimonial style, as a personal ruler who controlled all important decisions, his stroke in late 2018 made the machinery of government ineffective and raised serious questions about whether or not he was even fit to rule, which led to a crisis of legitimacy. Members of his family (e.g., First Lady Sylvie Valentin Bongo; his brother Fred Bongo, who was in charge of security; and his eldest son Nouredin) soon took power into their own hands, sidelining influential super-ministers and chiefs of staff who had been managing (or mismanaging) the president's ambitious development program, Gabon Emergent. Two highly publicized anti-corruption campaigns, Operation Mamba and Operation Scorpion, removed from power several influential ministers and replaced them with members of the Bongo family, especially Nouredin, who is now seen to be the heir apparent. Having consolidated his fragile personal power base through his dynastic claim, Ali Bongo also needed to make several international voyages to assure foreign investors that he would honor the country's debts (including Eurobonds held by private creditors), as well as regional and global commitments to environmental, biodiversity, security and trade agreements.

The effects of the pandemic were at first mitigated in Gabon by the presence of an effective (by regional standards) public health system, with large hospitals and many foreign practitioners. The number of cases has remained low in Gabon, in part because the government pursued a strict confinement and lockdown approach. The real negative effects of the pandemic have been indirect. For example, the collapse in international commodity prices (particularly oil, manganese and timber prices) due to the massive reduction in global consumption and demand led to a collapse in government revenues, and thus the need to curb spending on the president's Gabon Emergent development plan and find revenue to offset the loss of rents from the extractive industries (e.g., mining and oil). The anti-corruption operations were one effort to recoup money that had been illegally gained by super-ministers, chiefs of staff and their henchmen. Borrowing was another, as Ali Bongo continued to increase the public debt from 52.5% of GDP in 2016 to 62.2% in 2019.

## History and Characteristics of Transformation

During the Cold War era from 1960–1989, the young government of Gabon was able to trade loyalty to France and the West for them turning a blind eye to its one-man, one-party authoritarian rule under the late Omar Bongo. Since the country had always maintained a staunch commitment to free market capitalism, the few national enterprises that were created by Omar Bongo were never a real stumbling block to market liberalization. At the end of the Cold War in 1989, however, there were numerous pressures on Omar Bongo to introduce multiparty democracy. Through wily statecraft and considerable prowess, Omar Bongo was able to successfully stage a national convention, draft a new liberal constitution in 1991 with the help of opposition leaders in the country and introduce numerous democratic reforms of the presidency and the electoral system. Yet, in the end, Omar Bongo was able to maintain his and his party's hold on power. When Omar Bongo died in 2009, his hold on power was so strong that he was able to posthumously transfer the presidency to his son, Ali Bongo.

Since 2009, Ali Bongo has attempted several reforms under the rubric of an ambitious development program, Gabon Emergent. The program included efforts to diversify the economy away from the extractive industries, protect and preserve large swaths of the country's equatorial rainforest (including the creation of a series of public wildlife reserves), and capture control of subsurface minerals and forest timber through resource nationalization. One of the first major reforms Ali Bongo implemented upon assuming office was the requirement for foreign lumber firms to process timber domestically in order to avoid foreign firms simply exporting raw unstripped logs. He also rewrote the country's petroleum code in order to increase the state's share in the profits. He created a duty-free port at Owendo and aggressively sought out new foreign investors to reduce the country's dependence on France, attracting Chinese companies to invest in Gabon's mining and oil sectors, and Singapore's Olam group to invest in palm oil plantations. He built long transportation corridors, paved roads and constructed bridges, to stimulate economic development in the territory, which is 70% covered in rainforest. But in

order to finance all of these ambitious plans, he borrowed from public and private lenders, doubling the debt-to-GDP ratio, which may lead to economic stagnation and the necessity to impose austerity measures in order to secure IMF relief.

The future of the country is intricately linked with the future of the Bongo dynasty, which has ruled Gabon since the late Omar Bongo came to power in 1967. Ali Bongo managed to gain the support of the ruling PDG and thereby secured absolute power, manufacturing a series of slim victories in what are widely considered to be fraudulent elections. Despite losing 15 seats in the 2018 legislative elections, the PDG maintained its two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, winning 98 out of 143 seats.

The division of the opposition in Gabon has been one stumbling block to a peaceful, democratic transition of power. However, another key stumbling block has been the ruling party, the PDG, which has become a strong inter-elite organization that enables the “selectorate” to retain power and privilege. So long as the Bongo dynasty maintains the support of the PDG, its family members are the only candidates with access to a nationwide electoral machinery that is staffed with willing and able collaborators, who can manipulate electoral lists, redraw electoral districts (gerrymandered in favor of the PDG), limit or ban opposition party gatherings, buy votes, count ballots in ways that increase the vote share of a favored candidate and depress the vote share of rival candidates, all of which are sanctioned by a Constitutional Court staffed by presidential appointees and presided over by a member of the Bongo clan. When (despite everything) the people rose up to oust Ali Bongo from power, he has demonstrated a willingness to use retaliatory violence, threatening, arresting, imprisoning and even killing opponents during episodes of post-election violence. At the same time, he has shown clemency, allowing some of his most vocal opponents in the party (e.g., Jean Ping, who still claims to have won the 2016 presidential election) and civil society (e.g., Marc Ona Essangui, an environmental activist who has criticized the mismanagement and corruption of Ali Bongo and members of his regime in the global media) to speak publicly in ways that more tyrannical rulers would never accept. After the attempted coup in January 2019, however, Ali Bongo has matured into a more security conscious authoritarian ruler, with his family playing an increasingly dynastic role in government policymaking.

The BTI combines text analysis and numerical assessments. The score for each question is provided below its respective title. The scale ranges from 1 (worst) to 10 (best).

## Transformation Status

### I. Political Transformation

#### 1 | Stateness

There is no rebel movement, organized criminal organization or terrorist group in the territory that challenges the state's monopoly on the use of force. In many ways, the country is run as a soft police state, using retaliatory violence effectively and closely watching for signs of any opponents who might rise up to challenge the state's authority. Arms are not widespread and few men receive any sort of military training. Organized crime, to the extent that it exists, works with the state, rather than against it; the state uses corruption more than violence.

In Gabon, a strong consensus on the identity of the nation-state exists. Given the small population size and strong social interconnectedness that cuts across regional and ethnic boundaries, the late Omar Bongo was able to construct a sense of identification with the Gabonese nation. Being a successful case of nation-building, there is also fairly strong xenophobia in Gabon. Xenophobia is especially prevalent during times of economic downturn, with Equatorial Guineans and Cameroonians who have migrated to the country for economic reasons discriminated against, and this can roll over into denying them full citizenship rights. The late Omar Bongo encouraged violent attacks and mass expulsions of foreigners in order to build the Gabonese nation-state and divert attention away from intra-ethnic tensions that could cause political instability. Ali Bongo, who was educated abroad, and whose wife is French, has, on the contrary, surrounded himself with foreign advisers, reaping the ire of those Gabonese who maintain the xenophobic nationalism of his father's era. The country celebrated its 60 anniversary of independence without any challenge from subnational regionalist movements.

#### Question Score

Monopoly on the  
use of force

9

'06 9 '22 10

1

State identity

9

'06 9 '22 10

1

Gabon is not a country with great religious differences. The majority of citizens are nominally Christian, with a strong element of syncretic practices involving traditional religious cults. The state remains secular (French style “laïcité”). Of the population of Gabon, 6% practice Islam, including the president, Ali Bongo. Most follow Sunni Islam, while 80–90% of the Muslims are foreigners. The government television stations accord free transmission time to the Catholic Church, Protestant congregations and Islamic mosques. In addition to these world religions, there are numerous indigenous African religions, which are practiced freely in Gabon. The constitution provides for freedom of religion and the government generally respects this right in practice.

No interference of religious dogmas

10



1

Basic services have not been disrupted due to the pandemic. The administrative structures provide basic public services to the urban populations, but often fail to provide them in rural areas. This must also be seen in the context of the country's geographic situation: while 85% of the territory is very sparsely populated, Gabon has a very high urbanization rate of almost 90%. The majority of the population is concentrated in a few urban centers, most notably the capital Libreville. Corruption is widespread, which also hurts the delivery of basic public goods. According to a World Bank report published in 2020 based on in-depth field research by a team of development economists, poverty is more widespread in small towns (those with a population below 50,000) than in medium-sized cities (50,000–100,000), which in turn record higher poverty rates than large cities of 100,000 inhabitants or more. The incidence of poverty is also markedly lower in small towns surrounding the main urban centers compared to other small urban zones and rural areas. Some 48% of the poor are scattered throughout small and medium-sized towns (with populations of 10,000–100,000) as well as small urban communes with under 10,000 inhabitants, which combined contain just 40% of the population.

Basic administration

6



1

But there is no war, neither civil war nor protracted social conflicts, which prevents the delivery of basic public services to any region of the country, and law and order is effectively maintained by the state security and police forces, despite perceptions of widespread corruption.

## 2 | Political Participation

General elections are conducted regularly at the national level and universal suffrage with secret ballot is ensured in principle. As the U.S. State Department reports, opposition leaders have alleged irregularities such as ballot stuffing, vote-buying, polling stations opening without the presence of opposition representatives and unfair treatment of the opposition by the Gabonese Elections Center during the most recent elections in 2018. According to the U.S. State Department, domestic and international organizations were not authorized to observe the elections. A limited African Union observer mission did not comment on whether the elections were free and fair but noted some irregularities.

Free and fair elections

4



1

Due to dissention within his own party, President Ali Bongo could barely find enough cohesion within the PDG to hold the much anticipated legislative and municipal elections, which had originally been scheduled for December 2016 but were only held in October 2018. The government adopted a constitutional amendment that increased the number of deputies from 120 to 143, with gerrymandering highly beneficial to the ruling PDG, as it reserved almost as many seats for the Bongo clan's fief of Haut-Ogooué as for Libreville, despite having a population four times smaller. The government also decided to halve the number of senators, from 102 to 52. This was controversial because some provinces would have more than others. Haut-Ogooué received 11 senators, while the Estuary, the most populous province and home to the capital Libreville, received only eight.

The ruling Bongo family, which is composed of hundreds of members who occupy key posts in the government and economy of the country, exercises tremendous informal influence over formal government representatives, in addition to often being elected representatives seated in national, regional and local governments. The dynastic nature of the Bongo regime became more pronounced during the presidential absence of Ali Bongo after his stroke in late 2018. It was widely reported that his half-brother, Frédéric Bongo, general director of the Republican Guard's special services, had taken charge of the regime during his brother's absence. Also influential are business elites, especially those connected to the Franco-Gabonese business community. Unlike in the previous review period, during which a coup attempt seemed to have occurred, the security apparatus seems to have generally remained under civilian control.

Gabon is a multiparty system. There are numerous opposition parties, many of them small and unstable, which operate relatively freely. Traditions of civil society are relatively pronounced, at least in the broader sense (i.e., beyond just NGOs). Gabon's labor code recognizes the right of workers to form and join independent unions and bargain collectively. The Gabonese Trade Union Confederation (COSYGA) is affiliated with the International Trade Union Confederation. The Syndicat de l'Education Nationale (SENA) has denounced structural problems in education. The independent oil workers syndicate, Organisation nationale des employés du pétrole (ONEP), is the most effective trade union in the country, and represents workers in the economic sector that provides the bulk of the country's exports and government revenues. There are few legal constraints imposed on individuals who want to form or join non-governmental organizations or other interest groups. But when such groups challenge the power structure of the status quo, they can then be subject to repression by the security forces under the control of the Bongo family.

To counter the spread of COVID-19, the government introduced a number of restrictions, including closing restaurants, educational institutions and churches, banning assemblies, and limiting travel. These measures are constantly re-evaluated and lifted or reintroduced according to the circumstances. A curfew is still in place.

Effective power to govern

3

'06 '22 10

3

1

Association / assembly rights

4

'06 '22 10

4

1

The constitution of the Republic of Gabon explicitly guarantees “freedom of expression” and “liberty of the press,” and Article 8 requires the president to oversee the protection of these rights and liberties. The government subsidizes print media XAF 500 million per year, and as a result the number of media outlets has substantially increased from around 20 in 2000 to around 100 in 2020. But media that is openly hostile to the continuing rule of the Bongo family and/or the ruling PDG, receive no state funding, and when they are perceived to have gone too far are harassed by the police and intimidated by the security forces.

According to the NGO Reporters without Borders, domestic laws on freedom of expression and media freedoms do not meet international standards. The 2016 communication code decriminalizes media offenses but otherwise restricts the freedoms of not only the print media but also all other forms of broadcast, print, digital and cinematographical production. Since a new media regulator, the High Authority for Communication (HAC), began operating in 2018, critical reporting of the president or his close associates is liable to result in suspensions, with the regulator’s sole aim to protect the regime’s interests.

The state does not practice overt censorship, but print journalists working for private media outlets do occasionally self-censor to placate owners.

Libel can be either a criminal offense or a civil matter. Editors and authors of libelous material may be jailed for two to six months and fined XAF 500,000 to XAF 5 million (\$1,008 to \$10,080). Penalties for libel, disrupting public order and related offenses include a one- to three-month publishing suspension for a first offense and a three- to six-month suspension for repeat offenses.

### 3 | Rule of Law

The separation of power is only a formality. Informal networks, dominated by the Bongo family and its allies, permeate all formal institutions. In theory, the legislature passes laws, the executive executes them and the judiciary applies them to cases, civil and criminal. In reality, the parliament, where the PDG has a comfortable majority, is weak compared to the strong executive president. The Senate, an institution created to house retired elderly party members in style, has even less autonomy. The courts are not independent of the executive either. Therefore, despite the de jure constitutional separation of powers, there is de facto unity of powers in the executive. The introduction of a COVID-19-related state of emergency was well within the framework of existing law, and largely complied with the principles of necessity and proportionality. Although a curfew was imposed between 18:00 in the evening and 05:00 in the morning, the public did not face a complete shutdown or strict confinement measures. Yet, the Bongo regime established the Commission technique du Comité de pilotage du plan de veille et de riposte contre l’épidémie à Coronavirus (Copil), which reported directly to the president, without any apparent oversight by the legislature or judicial review by the courts.

Freedom of  
expression

4

'06 '22 10

4

1

Separation of  
powers

3

'06 '22 10

3

1

The judiciary is comprised of individuals selected by the Bongo clan and loyal to the ruling PDG and has shown no independence with respect to executive power. The judiciary is accountable to the Ministry of Justice, through which the president has the power to appoint and dismiss judges. The highest court in the land is the Constitutional Court, which is presided over by the former mistress of President Omar Bongo, the father of current president Ali Bongo, and who has validated a series of irregular presidential elections with brazen partiality.

Independent  
judiciary

3

'06 '22 10

3

1

Members of the Bongo clan are immune from prosecution, but the government has implemented an anti-corruption campaign, Operation Scorpion. Between 2018 and 2019, bank statements showed more than 43 unidentified transfers of money, with a total value of XAF 61 billion, to which presidential Chief of Staff Brice Laccruche Alihanga received 30%, his team running the Sogara refinery 30% and his former right-hand man 20%. Alihanga was removed from office at the end of 2019. Similarly, Sogara's deputy general manager, financial director and director of operations were all dismissed at the end of 2019 for complicity in embezzlement. But not a single member of the Bongo clan was implicated, despite close collaboration with First Lady Sylvie Bongo.

Prosecution of  
office abuse

4

'06 '22 10

4

1

According to the U.S. State Department, laws that establish criminal penalties for corruption are not effectively implemented by the government. In fact, officials engaged in corrupt practices frequently receive impunity.

Legal safeguards against arbitrary arrest and detention are not upheld by police, detainees are often denied access to lawyers, and lengthy pretrial detention is commonplace. Cases of arbitrary arrests linked to opposition protests and activism have increased since the failed coup attempt of January 2019. According to Freedom House, a new state media regulator created in February 2018, the High Authority of Communication, immediately imposed suspensions on three news outlets in August 2018 in response to reporting on government corruption, while another newspaper was suspended for three months in November for publishing an article on the president's poor health after his stroke. In recent years, the regime has repeatedly denied permits for meetings of opposition protests and has used tear gas and arrests to disperse unauthorized demonstrations against Ali Bongo.

Civil rights

4

'06 '22 10

5

1

At the time of writing, it remains quite difficult to establish a clear and unbiased picture regarding the COVID-19 lockdown. The proportionality of the measures (which include harsher lockdown and curfew measures than in other African countries), possible human rights violations in connection with the enforcement of the lockdown and the severe restrictions placed on freedom of movement inside Gabon were increasingly debated on social media.

#### 4 | Stability of Democratic Institutions

Generally, political institutions are democratic on paper only, although Gabon rather qualifies as a “soft” autocracy. In principle, existing institutions like parliament could be used for democratization in the future. During the period under review, informal authoritarian institutions have been more important. After Ali Bongo’s stroke in autumn 2018, the absence of a convalescing president revived a political struggle between Gabon’s powerful clans. At first, the failed coup appeared to have played into the hands of the “securocrats,” led by the president’s half-brother Frédéric Bongo, head of state intelligence services, with support from Marie-Madeleine Mborantsuo, the president of the Constitutional Court, who had used her position, case by case, to authorize governmental prerogatives in the absence of the head of state. However, soon being perceived as a potential rival to his half-brother, Frédéric Bongo was deprived of the armed wing of his intelligence division during an overhaul of the intelligence services on July 9.

Julien Nkoghe Bekalé, who had been named as prime minister on January 12, 2019, and who had suffered eight cabinet reshuffles over the course of that year (on January 30, February 5, February 20, March 20, June 10, October 4, November 7 and December 2) could only silently watch the struggle between the clans of the ruling dynasty, powerless to intervene.

Frequent government reshuffles are used as a tool to constantly rotate the political elite. Since ministers are typically recruited from parliament, the circulation of members of parliament into and out of government also introduces some instability into the parliament, which could lead to a loss of institutional memory and procedural continuity.

Acceptance of formal democratic institutions is limited and contingent on whether they threaten the Bongo dynasty’s grip on power or not. The role of formal democratic institutions is to legitimate policies made by President Bongo and his clan. In a move emblematic of the dynastic politics that have captured state institutions since the death of former President Omar Bongo and the succession of his son, Ali Bongo, in 2009, the heir apparent Nouredin Bongo Valentin was named general coordinator of presidential affairs in a 2019 administrative reorganization of the palace. In addition, Nouredin Bongo has been given the responsibility of “aiding the president in the conduct of all state affairs and overseeing the strict application of all his decisions.” Protected from ordinary Gabonese citizens by the use of retaliatory violence, Ali Bongo, who rarely appeared in public or the press in 2019, seems to have delegated governmental decision-making, at the end of the year, to his wife Sylvie and eldest son Nouredin.

On the other hand, the results of the 2020 Afrobarometer Survey show that public demand for democracy is high. A majority of Gabonese (about 66%) think that leaders should be chosen in elections and 77% prefer a multiparty system over any

Performance of  
democratic  
institutions

3

'06 '22 10

3 00

1

Commitment to  
democratic  
institutions

2

'06 '22 10

2 00

1

other alternative. This shows that there is a general acceptance of the multiparty system as the *modus operandi* of politics. Among the political elite, there are only a few actors that would contest the existence of parties and elections. The problem, therefore, is not the non-existence or the non-acceptance of institutions, but rather that they lack efficiency due to informal power structures that permeate the formal sphere. Thus, although the Gabonese prefer democracy over any other system, they are at the same time very dissatisfied: according to the Afrobarometer, only 22% of the respondents think that their country is a full democracy or a democracy with minor problems.

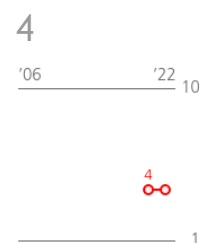
## 5 | Political and Social Integration

The ruling Parti Démocratique Gabonaise controls the National Assembly, Senate, as well as most local and regional governments. Thus, the party system can be characterized as hegemonic. Legislative and municipal elections, which had originally been scheduled for 2016 but were delayed to 2018, produced disappointing but not devastating results. Despite losing 15 seats, the ruling party maintained its two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, winning 98 of the 143 seats, thereby preserving the right to elect the government, which rested in the hands of Emmanuel Issoze Ngondet through the remainder of the year. The second largest party, Les Démocrates, which is chaired by Guy Nzouba Ndama, a former speaker of the National Assembly, won 11 seats, which made it the biggest parliamentary opposition group. Nzouba Ndama has been noted for his political survival, which was attributed to his loyalty to the Bongos. The PDG's long hold on power has been attributed to the successful distribution of government posts to each of Gabon's many and various ethnic groups, a policy referred to as "géopolitique."

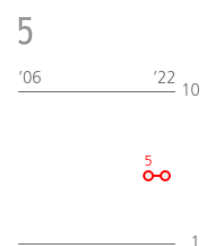
The opposition spectrum is splintered and marked by constant reorganization. Opposition leaders are often opportunistic and coopted by the regime. One of Gabon's biggest problems is the political void and general disillusionment with the political class. In the latest Afrobarometer survey, 62.7% of the respondents stated that they have no trust in the ruling party, although 54.7% also have no trust in the opposition. There is a huge amount of dissatisfaction in the country, which the current opposition has so far been unable to channel into a credible alternative.

Relatively few non-governmental organizations are able to operate in Gabon, because – despite freedom of association being guaranteed by the constitution – the procedures for formally registering NGOs are burdensome and inconsistently implemented, which leaves many groups vulnerable to accusations of non-compliance with the law. Gabon's largest trade union, after suffering repression in 2017, called on its members to lay down their tools in protest against government austerity measures introduced in 2018. The most powerful interest groups in Gabon are business lobby groups. Gabon established the Investment Promotion Agency

### Party system



### Interest groups



(ANPI-Gabon) in 2014 to promote investment. It houses more than 20 public and private agencies, including the Chamber of Commerce, National Social Security Fund (CNSS), and National Health Insurance and Social Security (CNAMGS). In 2012, the government also created La Société Commerciale Gabonaise de Réassurance (SCG-Ré), in collaboration with major insurance companies, under the guiding hand of the president's father-in-law, Edouard-Pierre Valentin, with the aim of coordinating insurance rates. At the national level, oil companies have signed joint-venture agreements, which allow them to run offshore oil enclaves with thin supervision. At the local level, capacity-building to improve advocacy techniques has taken place in Minvoul, Haut-Ntem, which has brought cocoa farmers together within a cooperative.

Gabon does not qualify as a democracy, according to the BTI methodology. However, despite their discontent with the way it has been implemented, the Gabonese desire democracy and reject military rule. The most recent Afrobarometer report shows that a vast majority of the Gabonese disapprove of the general orientation of the country, the way in which recent elections have been run and the performance of the government of Ali Bongo. Meanwhile, they prefer democracy over any other form of government (77%), reject military rule (75%), reject one-party rule (91%) and dictatorship (10%). Only 12% said they were satisfied with the way democracy in their country functioned.

Trust in key political institutions such as the parliament is also low.

An Afrobarometer survey published in October 2019 reported that 79% of Gabonese voters had a negative opinion of their elected representatives. In April 2018, the National Assembly's term had legally expired when Prime Minister Issoze-Ngondet failed to hold legislative elections, as had been promised. When elections were finally held in October of that year, turnout for the first round was 58.63%, but only 28.5% in the Estuaire province, where nearly half of the population lives. This suggests a low level of trust in government. This must be contrasted with the large number of social associations, religious organizations and traditional ethnic associations to which many Gabonese belong. In this sense, Gabon is a society of joiners, which indicates a higher level of social capital than the low turnout in elections might suggest. Extended family networks with a strong matrilinear element are extremely important in providing a degree of social cohesion, and a web of solidarity and loyalty across regions and ethnic groups.

Approval of  
democracy

n/a

'06 '22 10

n/a 1

Social capital

6

'06 '22 10

6 10

1

## II. Economic Transformation

### 6 | Level of Socioeconomic Development

Despite an above average GDP/capita of \$7,952.53 (2018), Gabon continues to face large income inequality. According to the World Bank 2020 Poverty Assessment, which draws on household survey data (EGEP 2005 and 2017), Demographic Health Surveys (DHS 2000 and 2012) and population census (RGPL 2013), about one in 10 Gabonese live in extreme poverty. According to the 2017 household budget survey, 33.4% of the population live below the national poverty line (set at \$5.70 per day PPP in 2011). Yet over half (51%) of Gabon's population identifies as poor, revealing unmet aspirations for better living conditions. In rural areas, more than 50% of residents are poor, with poverty three times deeper among the rural poor compared to the urban poor. About 8.2% of Gabonese live in extreme poverty and are unable to afford enough food to meet the minimum nutritional requirements of 2,100 kcal per person per day. Gabon ranks a low 100 out of 156 countries in progress made toward the Sustainable Development Goals. It also scores relatively low on the Human Development Index (HDI) compared to countries with similar incomes, although its HDI has improved over recent decades, from 0.646 in 2009 to 0.703 in 2019. Similarly, over the same time period, Gabon's Gender Inequality Index score has improved from 0.581 to 0.525. But its Gini coefficient of 0.38 has not been revised since 2017 and, given the nature of the regime selectorate and the fall in world commodity prices, it is likely that income inequality has risen since then.

Question  
Score

Socioeconomic  
barriers

4

'06 '22 10

4

1

Economic indicators		2017	2018	2019	2020
GDP	\$ M	14929.5	16862.3	16874.5	<b>15593.2</b>
GDP growth	%	0.5	0.8	3.9	<b>-1.3</b>
Inflation (CPI)	%	2.7	4.7	2.5	<b>1.2</b>
Unemployment	%	19.9	19.8	19.6	<b>20.5</b>

Economic indicators		2017	2018	2019	2020
Foreign direct investment	% of GDP	8.8	8.2	9.2	-
Export growth	%	3.9	4.9	20.4	3.2
Import growth	%	-7.3	1.6	17.9	-5.4
Current account balance	\$ M	-	-	-	-
Public debt	% of GDP	62.9	60.9	59.8	77.4
External debt	\$ M	6499.3	6811.3	7198.9	7615.9
Total debt service	\$ M	624.1	722.4	696.2	1412.6
Net lending/borrowing	% of GDP	0.2	0.4	2.9	-
Tax revenue	% of GDP	11.1	10.2	11.5	-
Government consumption	% of GDP	13.2	10.6	11.0	11.8
Public education spending	% of GDP	3.3	2.9	2.8	-
Public health spending	% of GDP	1.8	1.6	-	-
R&D expenditure	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Military expenditure	% of GDP	1.8	1.5	1.6	1.8

Sources (as of December 2021): The World Bank, World Development Indicators | International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Military Expenditure Database.

## 7 | Organization of the Market and Competition

Since political independence, Gabon has been a free market “capitalist” economy, open to foreign investors. The Heritage Foundation scores Gabon’s economic freedom as 56.7, ranking its economy as the 118th freest in the 2020 index. Its overall score has increased by 0.4 points (helped by a slightly higher score for property rights). Gabon is ranked 16 out of 47 countries in the sub-Saharan Africa region. Its overall score is slightly above the regional average but well below the world average. Opening a mining company in Gabon or registering a Gabonese oil company is subject to a tax of 35%. But behind the official façade is an unlevel playing field, where for many decades French corporations benefited from inequalities enhanced by cooperation accords. Concessions for valuable natural resources (the main economic activity) often involved corrupt payments to government officials and opaque bidding processes that privileged regime insiders and cronies, especially members of the ruling Bongo clan. On the Doing Business index, Gabon ranks near the bottom (169 out of 190 countries). According to the latest Doing Business Report by the World Bank, it takes 10 days and seven

Market  
organization

4

'06 '22 10

4

1

procedures to open a business in Gabon. Law 5-89 on competition banned anti-competitive activities, except for those established by law, and established an advisory commission responsible for reviewing and proposing recommendations on competition-related issues. Private operators may intervene in certain markets but on terms set by law. For example, in the electricity sector, only electricity generation is not monopolized, with the transportation and supply of electricity monopolized by the Energy and Water Company of Gabon (SEEG).

Rates are regulated and may be altered through adjustment mechanisms. A formula for reviewing rates is negotiated and specified in the concession contract between the state and private operators. In practice, however, competition is limited. Several independent economic regulators (e.g., the Electronic Communications, Postal and Print Media Distribution Regulatory Authority; the Drinking Water and Electricity Sector Regulatory Agency; and the Rail Transport Regulatory Agency) have been in place for several years.

The Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) regulation on competition law only applies to abuses of dominant market positions and cartel behaviors that have a regional dimension (e.g., involve legal entities registered and based in the CEMAC region). Individuals and entities involved in an abuse of a dominant market position or cartel behavior may be liable, according to CEMAC regulations, to being fined or imprisoned. No provisions in the Gabonese Competition Law prohibit exclusivity arrangements between two or more parties for the purchase of goods exclusively from a specified seller. Gabonese antitrust law is grounded in Loi n° 14/1998 of July 23, 1998, which fixes the competition regime (articles one and two), bans collective (articles seven to 11) and individual (articles 12 to 23) anti-competitive practices, requires transparency in commercial transactions (articles 24 to 32), and defines powers of investigation (articles 42 to 56) and criminal penalties (articles 57 to 59). This law was used by the government to control the prices of basic medical supplies during the pandemic in 2020. The Direction Générale de la Concurrence et de la Consommation is a public directorate within the Ministry of Economy, which is responsible for ensuring healthy and fair market competition, protecting consumers in their daily lives, and controlling the quality of goods and services. Gabon is not a member of the International Competition Network, the only global body devoted exclusively to competition law enforcement.

Competition policy

4

'06 '22 10

4

1

In April 2018, with 44 other African Union member states, Gabon signed a new free trade agreement to create a single African market of economic cooperation, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Gabon also follows the import tariff structure of Central Africa, which requires that no import tariffs be imposed on goods produced within a CEMAC member state. Gabon's value added tax (VAT) is generally 18%. A reduced VAT of 10% is applicable to mineral water, cement, sugar and chicken produced in Gabon, while milk products, butter, margarine, cereals, medicine and medical supplies, and fertilizer are totally exempt from VAT. In addition, companies operating in Ali Bongo's new Special Economic Zone are exempt from customs taxes and some income taxes.

Gabon has a solid banking system, which is oriented toward international standards. But the banking market is dominated by only three banks – BGFI Bank, BICIG and UGB – which account for more than 75% of all the jobs in the sector. BGFI Bank is the market leader, followed by BICIG and UGB. Out of the XAF 1.764 billion in loans in February 2019, BGFI Bank represented 40%, far ahead of UGB (19%), BICIG (19%) and the four other banks that together total 22%. However, with regard to the number of open bank accounts, the situation varies: UGB occupies first place, accounting for 36% of all bank accounts in the country. The banking sector is uncompetitive and has few actors compared to other African countries. As a result, banks usually perform well.

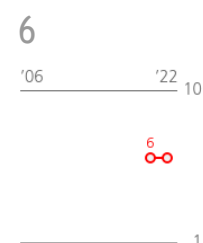
The bank capital to assets ratio stood at 8.9% in 2019 (with an upward trend since 2016). In the same year, the percentage of non-performing loans stood at 12.8%.

## 8 | Monetary and fiscal stability

Monetary policy is an instrument of French cooperation with its former African colonies. The Communauté Financière Africaine (CFA) franc, the “céfa,” was established by France in the aftermath of the Second World War as a currency for its African colonies. The CFA franc is an African currency tied to the euro. According to news agency the Africa Report, on May 20, 2020, France passed a bill that modified its monetary agreement with the eight member states of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), including Gabon. As a result, the Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO) will no longer have to deposit half of its foreign exchange reserves with the Bank of France. The law also requires France to withdraw its presence from the monetary bloc's governance bodies, such as the BCEAO. This has increased the independence of the BCEAO and reduced the influence of France in the monetary zone.

Inflation is generally moderate and stood at 2.5% (CPI) in 2019, down from 4.7% in 2018. The real effective exchange rate was 102.6 in 2019.

### Liberalization of foreign trade



### Banking system



### Monetary stability



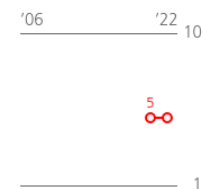
The government has started implementing some austerity measures in the wake of collapsing commodity prices for oil, manganese and wood (its three main exports).

The government budget for 2021 is forecast to be XAF 2,681 billion (€4 billion). Originally it was forecast to be XAF 3,047 billion. During 2020, the budget had already experienced a 9% decrease compared to forecasts. The budget for investment had already contracted 26% last year, an indirect result of the coronavirus pandemic and resulting economic crisis. But austerity will not be enough to ensure the solvency of the state. Therefore, a task force run by Nouredin Bongo, the president's oldest son, announced in October 2020 that at least XAF 241 billion (€367 million) of Gabon's domestic debt is deemed fictitious and will have to be canceled. Granting oneself debt relief is not normal practice but reflects a desperate effort to balance the budget and avoid the constraining policies of an IMF austerity plan.

Despite being rich in natural resources (or perhaps because of that), Gabon is now the 10th most indebted country in sub-Saharan Africa, with \$174 million in bilateral debt, \$71 million in multilateral debt, \$157 million in outstanding bonds and \$250 million in private debt owed to commercial banks. On June 8, 2020, the IMF published a damning report on the poor management of public investments between 2010 and 2019 (i.e., during the Ali Bongo era), which concluded that the regime and its collaborators had depleted the public coffers by over \$5 billion. This money was raised as debt and spent on the president's ambitious Gabon Emergent development plan, with much of the money wasted on overlapping strategic and operational bodies (agencies, general directions) with unclear management roles, as well as siphoned off through grand corruption, as revealed by the anti-corruption Operation Scorpion. On April 15, 2020, the G20, under the influence of French President Emmanuel Macron, offered to defer interest payments but did not offer to cancel the underlying debt for increasingly indebted sub-Saharan African countries. Gabon received over \$100 million in an extended credit facility from this international gesture. But the International Monetary Fund estimates that Gabon's public debt "will exceed the high risk benchmark and reach 74.7% of GDP in 2020 and 2021, due to the past domestic arrears that were validated in the outstanding debt in 2019, widening budget deficits and slowing growth."

Fiscal stability

5



## 9 | Private Property

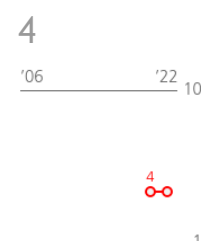
Laws for private and commercial property do not provide for any restrictions on nationality for the possession and ownership of property in Gabon, as sources such as the Oxford Business Report have assessed. Any foreigner desiring to lease or acquire property may do so according to the law. But Gabon scores poorly on the Global Property Index, which measures the degree to which laws protect private property rights and the government enforces those laws. According to a report by the Forests and the European Union Resource Network (FERN), the state is the major landowner in Gabon, with up to 90% of the country's territory not just under its control but largely defined as "private government land." Most of the population is technically landless, existing as mere occupiers and users of government property. Traditional rights to land and natural resources are not upheld. Formal routes to secure tenure are narrow in scope and inaccessible to the majority of the population. Urban and peri-urban populations are especially vulnerable to poorly compensated state-led evictions for questionable "public purposes." Rural populations are routinely displaced to make way for foreign concession activities. The current regime of land tenure favors privileged elites and privatized transnational interests, which in turn enjoy support from participating foreign governments.

President Bongo has tried to create a climate that will attract foreign private investors, which he sees as the primary engines of economic production and to which he provides legal safeguards. Large foreign private companies – such as Olam (Singapore), Shell (United Kingdom-Netherlands), Total (France-Belgium), Maersk (Denmark), Canal+ (France), DHL (Germany) and Bharti Airtel (India) – enjoy substantial protections. President Bongo has also not embarked on any extensive nationalization programs, even in the extractive industries sector.

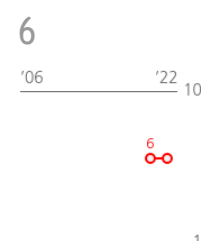
## 10 | Welfare Regime

Social safety nets are rudimentary, according to a study by the Montaigne Institute. Nevertheless, the average level of health care infrastructure in Gabon is relatively high compared to the rest of Africa. In the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2019 ranking, which takes into account aspects of health as well as other indicators such as education, Gabon ranks 115th in the world, but third in sub-Saharan Africa. Gabon has a relatively more developed social security system and employment structure, which places great emphasis on the public sector. The country has a total of 100,000 civil servants (i.e., a ratio of 55 per 1,000 inhabitants), one of the highest figures in Africa. During the coronavirus crisis, the state announced the creation of a XAF 5 billion national solidarity fund. Civil servants are not at risk of unemployment and continue to receive 100% of their

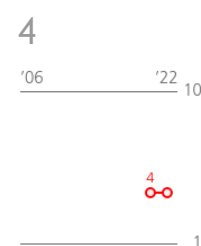
### Property rights



### Private enterprise



### Social safety nets



salaries. President Ali Bongo announced that the state would assume responsibility for water and electricity bills, provide free transport for the most vulnerable, suspend rent payments and establish food banks, among other measures. He also announced other measures for businesses, such as deferred charges, loan repayments, cash-flow facilities and tax relief, and for the protection of jobs, with the introduction of a technical unemployment allowance to cover 50–70% of gross monthly salaries, excluding bonuses. The implementation of some of these measures, such as the distribution of food aid, was not always effective. It is, therefore, likely that the health crisis will adversely affect the social security of vulnerable groups.

There are no laws that hinder access to participation in public office, or employment based on gender or sexual orientation. Gabon is more progressive in gender equality than many sub-Saharan African countries. But the government has not reported recent educational statistics to UNESCO, with Gabon's gross enrollment ratio and female-to-male enrollment last reported in 2011. The ratio of female-to-male enrollment in the labor force was not reported to the World Economic Forum for its Global Gap Index, but the ILO estimate that it is 71%, up from 47% 20 years ago.

In 2012, about 82% of people over 15 years old in Gabon were considered literate. Out of this number, 85% were male and 80% were female. This is one indicator of gender inequity in education in Gabon. Only 54% of female students in Gabon continue onto the latter parts of secondary education. The major inequalities in Gabon can be described regionally. The northern provinces of Ogooué-Ivindo and Woleu-Ntem are the poorest. They are predominantly rural, with a few cities at an incipient urbanization level, and sparsely populated by the largest ethnic group, the Fang. The northern Fang lack access to basic services and infrastructure and must contend with a variety of natural barriers. Southern provinces such as Ngounié and Nyanga also lag behind but have intermediate urbanized cities, where a larger number of poor people live. Low performance can be observed in terms of nutrition and basic medical care, health outcomes and wellness, access to services, affordability of housing, personal rights, and access to advanced education, where little progress has been made over time. There is little religious discrimination in Gabon and none of the Islamic extremism found in the north of the country. Freedom of religion is protected by law and practice. Ethnic discrimination is not widespread, as Gabon's multiethnic society lacks a dominant national ethnicity, and the Bongo regime has practiced patronage and clientelism, which has benefitted elites from each ethnic group, in a regional electoral strategy known as "géopolitique."

Equal opportunity

6

'06 '22 10

5 6

1

## 11 | Economic Performance

While Gabon enjoys a middle-income status with a per capita income over \$15,000 (PPP), that figure is deceptive, deriving essentially from revenues from extractive industries (oil, manganese, wood), rather than any kind of agricultural or industrial productive activities. The country's unemployment rate, which stands at over 20%, is the fifth highest in Africa. The economic growth rate has been negative year after year since the commodity price collapse in 2015, although 2019 showed a slight positive growth in GDP of 0.9%, due in part to a rebound in oil prices. Since Ali Bongo came to power and embarked on a lavish spending program Gabon Emergent, which was largely financed through borrowing, including private Eurobonds, the national debt has doubled to 60% of GDP. This year efforts were made to cut government spending, but these efforts were too little and came too late. The fundamentals of public finance appear to be sending Gabon back toward seeking debt relief, which could involve Gabon being subject to a destructive IMF austerity plan, unless things turn around.

Output strength

4

'06 '22 10

5  
4

1

## 12 | Sustainability

Since 2009, the government has been promoting Ali Bongo's Green Plan, which aims to turn Gabon into an environmentally sustainable emerging economy, announcing actions in various fields including environmental protection and ecotourism, with a network of national parks created in 2002 (30,000 km<sup>2</sup>, 11% of the territory). In June 2019, Lee White, a British zoologist and botanist born in Uganda, and defender of large mammals and African forests. Lee White studied in Gabon and was one of the founders of Gabon's national parks. He was subsequently named minister of water and forests, the sea and the environment, and placed in charge of the government's sustainable development objectives and land use planning. This represented the Bongo regime's commitment to environmental objectives. Official speeches have announced ambitions to attract some 5,000 visitors in 2017, 10,000 in 2022 and eventually 50,000 per year, but there were only 800 tourist entries in 2015. The much-promised ecotourism has not materialized. Thus, the current situation in Gabon's natural reserves is a combination of local rural populations deprived of their traditional livelihoods, including hunting and farming, and large European and Asian corporations receiving concessions from the government to develop mining operations and palm oil plantations.

Environmental policy

7

'06 '22 10

7  
0

1

The current U.N. Education Index (2019), in which Gabon scores of 0.650, documents some improvement in education for younger generations. According to the most recent data available from UNESCO, the total literacy rate in 2018 was 89.8%: 88.1% for men and 91.4% for women. The total illiterate population was 204,631 of which 85% were men and women over 24 years of age. The advancements in getting young children into school, especially young girls through Education for All (EFA) policies, have improved the educational level of Gabonese. Some 175,394 children are in preschool, 250,029 in primary school, 281,095 in secondary education and 179,211 in higher education. Unfortunately, the Bongo regime has not reported enrollment figures since 2011, and there are real concerns that former gains in education have been lost since the collapse in world commodities prices began in 2015. Public expenditure on education has not been reported for almost a decade but used to be within the 2–4% of GDP range.

In the 2020 Afrobarometer Survey, 81% of the population were dissatisfied with the way in which the government addressed their educational needs. Due to school closures during the coronavirus crisis, the quality of education is likely to have further worsened.

Education policy /  
R&D

4

'06 \_\_\_\_\_ '22 10

4  
o-o

1

# Governance

## I. Level of Difficulty

Gabon's location on the west coast of Africa has long privileged it geographically with respect to trade from the Atlantic world and its rich natural resource base is still a major potential economic advantage for development. However, the extreme poverty in which a large proportion of the population live, which is largely the result of the corrupt accumulation of wealth by a small percentage of the elite, and severe infrastructural deficiencies, with much of the country inaccessible because of a lack of roads, are a key structural impediment. The COVID-19 pandemic did not hit Gabon as hard as other countries, in part because the Bongo regime pursued a strict confinement policy and because public health services embarked on a dynamic vaccination program. In addition, most economic growth is driven by the extractive industries, not least oil but also manganese and timber. Fortunately, the respective workforces have remained largely unaffected by the coronavirus and have continued to produce goods for export.

Appearing in the early 1970s, the very first associative movements in Gabon took the form of cooperatives. Most of Gabon's NGOs, however, were created after 1990 during the period of political liberalization. During the 2000s, the number of associations was around 600. A recent survey carried out by the General Directorate for the Promotion of Associations in the Social Action and Family Sector estimated that the number of associations was 971 in 2013. In Gabon, fewer than 50 associations per year have been created since 2000. If a civic culture is a political culture characterized by an "acceptance of the authority of the state" and "a belief in participation in civic duties," then the absence of successionist movements or insurrections would seem to indicate an acceptance of state authority, although post-election violence is regular and periodic, and often requires the use of force by authorities to quell urban unrest. Social capital is not very high in Gabon, as decades of dynastic rule by the Bongo family in collaboration with the foreigners, including Gabon's former colonial power France, have undermined people's sense of trust in government. A 2019 Transparency International survey revealed that 80% of Gabonese respondents felt that corruption had become worse over the previous 12 months. A survey in 2017–18 reported that 35% of Gabonese had paid a bribe in contacts with public services, compared with 48% for the rest of the CEMAC. Bribes were most common in contacts with the police, courts, utility companies and when asking for permits or other documents. According to Transparency International, only a third of Gabonese trust the judiciary.

Structural  
constraints

5

'06 '22 10

5

1

Civil society  
traditions

6

'06 '22 10

6

1

There are no violent incidents based on social, ethnic or religious differences in Gabon, with the country considered a haven of peace in a central African region beset by protracted social conflict and war. The only regular kinds of violent political incidents are post-election protests, which often degenerate into violence once confronted by the authorities, with security forces being responsible for the vast majority of injuries and deaths. Such violence by the government has succeeded, so far, in maintaining public order and the state's monopoly on violence.

As of early 2021, it is difficult to assess the potential for conflict caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. No other intense violent events were reported during the review period.

Conflict intensity

2

'06 '22 10

2

1

## II. Governance Performance

### 14 | Steering Capability

Ali Bongo proposed his Gabon Emergent strategic development plan during the August 2009 presidential elections, promising to transform Gabon into an “emerging” country in less than a generation. In order to transform this campaign slogan into a program, Bongo presented a comprehensive development strategy, which outlined the orientations and programs that would lead to this emergence. Its broad themes were economic growth through the diversification of the economy, with a move away from the export of raw materials to value added production; government policies for poverty reduction; and the sustainable development of natural resources. His first five-year mandate followed the Strategic Plan for Gabon Emergent (PSGE), which included 28 government policies that aimed to develop four key factors of competitiveness: sustainable development, good governance, human capital and infrastructure. Each of these was pursued through massive public spending programs. These ambitious projects were funded by windfall oil, mining and timber revenues.

A dramatic decline in world commodity prices in 2014, which hit Gabon's key exports oil, manganese and timber, demonstrated the soundness of following a strategy of economic diversification, with a move away from extractive industries and raw materials. Real GDP growth averaged 6% in the four years to 2015 thanks largely to increased capital spending under the PSGE. The Gabon Industrial program saw manganese exports increase, production from the metallurgy complex at Moanda begin, and the development of agro-industrial units and factories for processing palm oil at the Awala and Mouila plantations. In the program's first phase (2010–14), high oil revenues helped propel overall economic growth to an average of 6%, led by the construction and services sectors. Meanwhile, the

Question  
Score

Prioritization

5

'06 '22 10

5

1

national debt skyrocketed. High commodities prices allowed Ali Bongo to borrow money to pay for his ambitious programs. But the collapse in oil prices in 2014 and declining oil production reduced available financing for the second phase of the PSGE (2016–20) and caused public debt to more than double.

According to an IMF report published in June 2020, out of a series of indicators for access to infrastructure (e.g., number of teachers, electricity capacity in kWh, kilometers of road, number of hospital beds and access to safe water), only access to hospital beds and safe drinking water have improved. According to the report, the investment planning phase has collapsed: no actor has an overall, precise and quantified vision of the investments and activities needed to achieve the strategic goals. Accordingly, there is no coordination between national and sectoral planning or between the different public entities, and no consolidated data on investment is available. Feasibility studies are not systematically conducted and are generally performed after a project has already been included in the budget. As a result, on average, the country loses around 30% of the value of its investments due to inefficiencies in its management process.

The collapse in oil prices in 2014 and declining oil production has reduced available financing for the second phase of the PSGE (2016–20) and caused public debt to more than double from 34.1% of GDP in 2014 to 62.4% of GDP in 2019. This increase is in part due to the issuing of \$1.5 billion (2013) and \$500 million (2015) in Eurobonds. After his re-election in 2016, Ali Bongo pledged to continue the PSGE, earmarking more public spending, borrowing more money and making Gabon Emergent his central public spending program. In 2020, five years before the 2025 cut-off year, President Bongo still believes in the possibility of Gabon becoming an emerging country. To achieve this, it will be necessary to learn from past lessons and make this development vision more concrete. According to a critical IMF report published in June 2020, the PSGE does not include a performance framework that establishes the targets and indicators to be monitored. The thematic plans associated with the PSGE do list strategic objectives and actions to be undertaken, but few are supported by measurable targets. Furthermore, the sectoral strategies do not include performance frameworks that define targets and indicators for outputs or outcomes. The PSGE strategy documents contain little precise data and figures for activities and projects with which to monitor progress in achieving objectives. These shortcomings and the dispersal of the various units involved in planning directly impair program-budgeting and project implementation.

#### Implementation

4



Generally, the government has demonstrated limited willingness or ability in policy learning. The rather short-sighted reliance on (high) oil revenues is a case in point.

The current reality in Gabon shows that it will be almost impossible for Gabon to achieve the regime's goal of becoming an "emerging country." Of course, like many African countries, Gabon has made efforts to switch to processing some of its resources, while simultaneously diversifying its economy. But the efforts made so far have been insufficient. The impact of this transformation on economic growth as well as the economic dynamic itself are unconvincing. However, one of the primary vocations of the government's economic development strategy is to stimulate the economy through the continuous acceleration of growth and new economic convergence. However, Gabon is far from this aspiration. With growth having halved, the economy finding itself stranded, economic integration decreasing and a lack of competitiveness, Gabon is still far from realizing its vision of becoming an "emerging country." So far, Ali Bongo has failed to learn from this spectacular failure and adapt his strategic plan accordingly. The government has no substitute for the PSGE.

Policy learning

4

'06 '22 10

5  
4

1

## 15 | Resource Efficiency

Public administration is expensive in Gabon given how little it provides to the people. The high price tag is mostly due to the expenses of ruling elites, who consume most of the government revenues, while leaving their fellow citizens in squalor, even demanding bribes for the provision of basic public goods. The high number of politically motivated dismissals over the past two years, conducted under the guise of anti-corruption efforts such as Operation Scorpion, has reduced the aggregate experience of public agency directors and managers. Recruiting procedures have been nepotistic, both in the presidency and in the ministries, where a second generation, the sons and daughters of the first generation of state officials, now preponderates. The government is yet to balance its budget since Ali Bongo assumed power, while public debt has doubled since 2009, due to his irresponsible borrowing to finance his PGSE strategic development plan. Failed decentralization, combined with clientelist patrimonialism, has resulted in the veritable dynastic rule of the Bongo family following President Ali Bongo's stroke in late 2018 and long absences while convalescing overseas in 2019. Only the state security forces have functioned effectively, in the sense that they have provided the regime with a strong apparatus for retaliatory repression.

Efficient use of assets

3

'06 '22 10

4  
3

1

The Bongo government is able to reconcile some conflicting interests. Here, Ali stands in the tradition of his father Omar, but is viewed as less successful and less fair in his consensus-building and distributional politics. Problem-solving takes the form of clientelistic distribution and is fragile. In other words, politics and policymaking are personalistic, and under the direction of President Bongo and members of his clan. The coordination of government has been handed to a series of all-powerful courtiers, usually appointed to the office of the presidential chief of staff. Maixent Nkani Accrombessi was the first of these appointments, an immigrant from Benin who controlled a diverse range of functions, such as strategic political intelligence, communication, and the management of sensitive business and judicial dossiers, including the disputed inheritance of the late Omar Bongo. In 2015, he was arrested by French police outside Paris and there began his rapid downfall. He was followed as chief of staff by Brice Laccruche Alihanga, a former banker who by playing palace politics with the presidential family managed to coordinate multiple portfolios before being ousted by the ruling family after Ali Bongo's stroke in late 2018. Alongside his boss was former super-minister Magloire Ngambia, who had been placed in charge of investments, public works and territorial development before his arrest during Operational Mamba in 2019. While his father was recuperating in a clinic in Morocco, the president's eldest son Nouredin Bongo accumulated a cluster of important portfolios. He was named as the opaque Presidential Affairs Coordinator on December 5, 2019, upon the influence of his mother, First Lady Sylvie (Valentin) Bongo. Coordination of government objectives since then has been a dynastic Bongo clan affair.

There is an expectation of gift-giving and facilitation payments among low-level government officials. This is part of the culture of doing business in Gabon. Such corrupt payments are treated by the laws of Gabon but can include under-the-table payments ("pots de vin"), fraud by the falsification of data or bills, extortion by coercion or force, and the receiving or demanding of undue money in the exercise of public function. There have been a number of highly publicized anti-corruption campaigns pursued by President Bongo in recent years.

In 2017, Ali Bongo tried to distance himself from his powerful cabinet director, Maixent Accrombessi, whose corrupt system of clients had become something of an embarrassment. He launched Operation Mamba, an anti-corruption campaign, in January 2017, arresting 90 persons from Accrombessi's inner circle. The ex-public works minister Magloire Ngambia, a symbol of the Operation Mamba anti-corruption drive, was only released on September 24, 2019. More recently, Operation Scorpion culminated on December 13, 2019, with the arrest of the president's ex-chief of staff Brice Laccruche Alihanga. However, these investigations and arrests are a spectacle, a smoke screen that diverts attention away from the incredible wealth the Bongo family has accumulated, which – despite numerous international investigations into their ill-gotten fortunes – continue to target the family's henchmen and former henchmen, who coordinate grand corruption from the presidential palace.

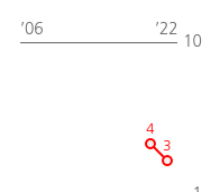
#### Policy coordination

7



#### Anti-corruption policy

3



In 2019, Nouredin Bongo Valentin was appointed to the presidential administration. His father assigned him the task of monitoring Brice Laccruche Alihanga, the presidential chief of staff. The anti-corruption operation Scorpion, carried out in early December 2019, led to the fall and arrest of Brice Laccruche. Nouredin Bongo Valentin is suspected of being behind this operation. During the Council of Ministers of December 5, 2019, Nouredin Bongo Valentin was appointed to the newly created post of General Coordinator of Presidential Affairs. This position is described as “a super chief of staff” and “number two in the regime.” This appointment is seen as a further step in the appointment of Nouredin Bongo Valentin as his father’s successor in what promises to be a third generation of quasi-hereditary dynastic succession.

The Public Procurement Code advocates openness, competitiveness and transparency in procurement processes via public access to information. The World Bank’s recent assessment of the public procurement system laments incomplete and obsolete enabling regulations for the CMP, especially the inadequacy of procedural manuals. In particular, the Gabonese authorities lack a manual on government procurement plans. In practice, most contracts are awarded by direct private agreement. The public has only limited access to government procurement information and only the legal framework for it is made available to the public. Opportunities to bid are only published when contracts are awarded via invitation to tender. Information on the awarding of contracts, the settlement of complaints, annual statistics and procurement plans are not published publicly.

The legal framework broadly empowers the National Assembly’s Finance, Budget and Public Accounting Commission, and the Audit Office (Cour des comptes) to conduct evaluations of public policies and performance audits. This includes surveys and external audits of projects. However, the institutions involved have no manual on auditing public investment projects. Similarly, the legislative framework foresees that these evaluation reports should be made publicly accessible. Yet, no recent externally financed public investment project has been audited by either the parliament or Audit Office.

## 16 | Consensus-Building

The Gabonese largely believe in democracy, as a recent poll by Afrobarometer demonstrated, with most respondents preferring democracy to autocracy or other forms of authoritarian rule. As reported by Freedom House, the ruling party, the PDG, has monopolized the executive and legislative branches of government since the late 1960s, and there is no realistic opportunity for the opposition to gain power through elections. In 2017, opposition leader Jean Ping called for a civil disobedience campaign, arguing that he had exhausted all institutional remedies for the fraudulent 2016 presidential election. He and several other opposition leaders boycotted the 2018 National Assembly elections. However, this has only exacerbated the absence of opposition voices in the institutions of power.

Consensus on goals

6

'06 '22 10

6

oo

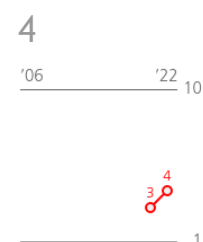
1

All major political actors have accepted the market economy as an enduring feature of their economic system since the years of the Cold War. There has been no change in this ideological consensus. Both the ruling party and the opposition agree that the export of natural resources (e.g., oil, manganese, iron and wood) or plantation-based products (e.g., palm oil and rubber) are the only path toward economic development for the country. Disputes arise only as to how rents and revenues should be distributed, not how they are to be generated.

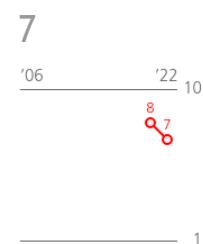
The main democratic reforms that are pursued by those outside the existing power structure are the establishment of a genuine multiparty system, fair and free elections, and the end of the Bongo clan's dynastic rule. Every five years an opposition leader emerges around whom the various elements of political opposition and civil society rally during a presidential election. When elections are fraudulently manipulated (e.g., through doctored electoral lists, restrictions on and intimidation of opposition parties, ballot stuffing, and opaque counting), opposition candidates lose the election and lose support, and eventually are faced with the dilemma of leaving the country and living in exile or collaborating with the regime. The most recent example of this pattern involved Jean Ping, who chose the former option. The main obstacles to democratic reform are powerful members of the Bongo dynasty; influential Téké securocrats in law enforcement and the armed forces; and members of the ruling PDG, whose privileges and power depend on the maintenance of a de facto single-party regime. Using either retaliatory violence, clientelist corruption or judicial entanglements (the courts always decide in favor of the regime), these anti-democratic actors use their influence to disrupt reform processes.

Gabon is a multiethnic society that lacks a majority ethnic group around which the ruling PDG can organize an ethno-nationalist power structure. Ethnic cleavages, therefore, exist. The Bongo family hails from the Haut-Ogooué region and the Téké group, a very small ethnic group in Gabon. Therefore, the Bongo's strategy has always been to use the ruling PDG as a vehicle for multiethnic caucusing. The underlying strategy has been to offer the largest ethnic group, the Fang, the post of prime minister, and local governments in the capital Libreville and the northern Woleu-Ntem region, while guaranteeing the other small ethnic groups protection from a Fang ethno-nationalist regime (as exists in neighboring Equatorial Guinea). Since most ethnic groups tend to be concentrated in different regions, the Bongo strategy has focused on coopting influential and educated ethnic elites from each region into local branches of the ruling party. In Libreville, the capital, where more than half of Gabon's population lives, almost all of the country's ethnic groups are represented. Until recently, the Bongos ensured that the majority Fang dominated municipal and regional government posts, with visible positions of power sometimes granted to numerically smaller but historically important groups such as the Mpongwe. This management of the balance of power between ethnicities is known in Gabon as "géopolitique." Since assuming office, Ali Bongo has broken

Anti-democratic actors



Cleavage / conflict management



many of the informal rules that were established by his father to maintain multiethnic solidarity and prevent ethnic violence. For example, Ali Bongo appointed as prime minister people who were not Fang. Franck Emmanuel Isoze-Ngondet, who was prime minister from 2016 to 2020, was a Bakota, and the current prime minister since July 16, 2020, Rose Christiane Ossouka Raponda, is a Mpongwe. Ali Bongo surrounded himself with foreigners, including his wife and thus his in-laws (who are French), his adopted children, and a chief of staff from Benin. This has started to fray the multiethnic peace, resulting in a growth in ethnonationalist sentiments among Fang communities in Libreville and Woleu-Ntem, and revindications by southern ethnic groups around the oil capital Port-Gentil.

Civil society in Gabon can be divided into traditional civil society (religious and ethnic organizations) and modern civil society (NGOs). The former tend not to have a role in the political system, while the latter tend to oppose the Bongo dynasty and the ruling PDG. In 2018, for example, a dozen civil society associations sued the French Development Agency (AFD) for granting a €75 million loan, the objective of which, according to them, was to “keep in place the government of Ali Bongo Ondimba.” The environmental NGO Brainforest saw its leader Marc Ona Essangui sentenced to a six-month prison sentence and fined \$10,000 in 2013 for defamation of Liban Soleman, then senior adviser to President Ali Bongo Ondimba. Essangui had sought to expose the opaque bidding and environmentally dangerous terms of the Chinese iron mine project in Belinga. Because modern civil society represents a challenge to the regime’s reputation overseas and cannot be silenced through fraudulent elections, the regime suppresses these organizations and excludes them from governance.

Despite the many ethnic and partisan/personality-based disputes over the distribution of resource revenues, the post-electoral violence that follows each presidential election, and the attempted military coup d’état in January 2019 by junior officers, which was quickly put down by the presidential guard, Gabon has not suffered any civil war or protracted social conflict of the kind one finds elsewhere on the sub-continent. Thus, Gabon has no legacy of historical injustices committed against ethnic minorities or regional successionist movements. “Stability” is the word most frequently used by analysts to describe the country.

Civil society  
participation

2

'06 '22 10

3  
2

1

Reconciliation

n/a

'06 '22 10

n/a

1

## 17 | International Cooperation

Generally speaking, the leadership only occasionally seeks out international cooperation as part of its development strategy. Furthermore, any such strategy was highly lopsided with Gabon's former colonial power, France, acting as the primary trading partner, investor, and donor for development aid. France continues to be the main foreign power able to leverage several things on multiple political, economic and cultural levels. Ali Bongo has continued his father's efforts to seek out other sources of support and has thus actively sought investors and lenders from East Asia, especially China and Singapore. The United States is also a longtime haven for members of the Bongo dynasty, many of whom have been educated there, and/or reside in mansions containing the ruling clan's ill-gotten goods. Before the coronavirus pandemic put an end to in-person meetings, Ali Bongo had been collaborating with Richard Attias to organize a series of so-called New York Forums in Libreville, with the first event held in June 2012. The last meeting took place in May 2014 and focused on the continent's transformation, that is, efforts to unlock the competitiveness of the African economy by building added value chains derived from the continent's natural resources.

As international backing is one of the three main pillars of the regime, alongside state security and big business, the government acts as a credible and reliable partner, frequently demonstrating initiative in advancing international cooperation efforts and actively contributing to them. An IMF mission in 2019 noted with satisfaction the Bongo regime's total payment of external arrears and the measures taken to avoid any accumulation of new external arrears in the national debt. Gabon actively participates in international organizations and, on October 13, 2020, Gabon was elected to be a member of the U.N. Human Rights Council. But the arrival of COVID-19 has reduced Ali Bongo's ability to focus on large international fora, and his poor state of health and the need to remain in the territory after the attempted coup of 2019 have limited his normal practice of traveling around the world, attending summits and meeting with foreign heads of state.

Traditionally, Gabon has cooperated with many of its neighboring states and complied with most international rules. These policies continued during the period under review. For example, in June 2019, on the 10th anniversary of the death of Omar Bongo, the president's father, several African heads of state were invited to Libreville, including Denis Sassou Nguesso from Congo-Brazzaville (whose daughter was married to the late Omar Bongo), Faustin-Archange Touadéra from the Central African Republic and Teodoro Obiang Nguema from Equatorial Guinea. These heads of state, representing the core of la Françafrique, have all faced charges of corruption in France, and largely share a set of common interests that revolve around protecting their wealth and retaining power. In 2019, 14 months after his stroke, Ali Bongo chaired a summit of the Economic and Monetary Community of

Effective use of support

7

'06 '22 10

7

oo

1

Credibility

8

'06 '22 10

8

oo

1

Regional cooperation

7

'06 '22 10

7

oo

1

Central African States (CEMAC) in Libreville, with the aim of establishing a common market. In 2020, he met with Cameroon President Paul Biya, the incumbent president of the CEMAC, by videoconference, for a bilateral summit on COVID-19 and its economic consequences. These neighbors agreed on two elements of monetary sustainability. First, an inflation target of 3%, which – despite the coronavirus crisis – has been kept to 2%. Second, sufficient foreign exchange reserves, with the monetary zone maintaining a 70% hedging rate for foreign exchange reserves. Equatorial Guinean President Obiang Nguema visited Ali Bongo in Libreville on July 12, 2019. The two counterparts purportedly discussed various issues of mutual interest concerning Central Africa, but neither appears ready to resolve the long simmering dispute over the islands of Cocotier and Mbane.

## Strategic Outlook

The main stumbling block to democratization in Gabon is the 53-year-old Bongo dynasty, which continues to rule the country. During the Cold War, the late Omar Bongo Ondimba managed to remain in power for decades by collaborating with France and the West in the struggle against the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries, especially in the proxy wars fought out on the African continent. After the Cold War, the regime continued to play on its loyalty and long-term collaborative alliance with France. But pressure for change has been building ever since, with a series of highly publicized anti-corruption cases filed in France against the Bongo family's "ill-gotten goods" and critical moments in the wake of fraudulent elections when opposition leaders were able to voice their grievances on French media, which is widely broadcast in Africa. Pressure for change can be applied in several ways. First, there was the attempted coup by junior officers in January 2019. These were young and idealistic men who believed that the people would come out onto the streets in support of their coup. Unfortunately, the people are afraid of the Bongo regime's security forces, which have routinely used retaliatory violence to suppress any and all public protests. Second, there is foreign pressure, including judicial cases against the Bongo family's ill-gotten goods and the possibility of shaming Ali Bongo in the public media. Unfortunately, these efforts have been suppressed at critical junctures when Ali Bongo traded his support for French and U.S. initiatives in international fora (e.g., the Paris Climate Accords) in return for the dismissal of criminal charges and the silencing of foreign governments' condemnation in the international media. Finally, there is support for presidential candidates that oppose the Bongo regime. So far, no serious effort has been made by any major power to support an opposition campaign and most opposition campaigns have been abandoned, after receiving token support, with opposition leaders left to defend themselves, often in exile. The opposition is generally weak, splintered and susceptible to cooptation by the ruling party. More coordination and collaboration within the opposition camp would surely raise the prospect of forming a credible alternative.

When President Ali Bongo Ondimba inherited power from his father Omar in 2009, he had the broad support of the ruling PDG as well as large foreign businesses, including new Chinese and Singaporean actors. Since his dynastic succession occurred in the context of a natural resource price boom, Ali Bongo at first enjoyed windfall revenues from oil and manganese, which enabled him to embark on a major public spending campaign for his development plan Gabon Emergent and promise to move the country away from a dependency on the extractive industries and toward a more diversified economy. But he indebted the country in this vainglorious pursuit of his ambitious plan. Consequently, when world commodity prices collapsed first in the wake of the world financial crisis and later in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, after which he suffered a stroke while visiting Saudi Arabia in 2018, he found himself lacking the key pillars of personal rule (i.e., money and health). Since then, he has quietly entrenched himself in the presidential palace, when not convalescing or receiving medical treatment abroad, and has let his family and clan assume the levers of power, especially his wife, brother and eldest son. As a result, the country has taken a more authoritarian turn. Thus, until the Bongos are removed from power, true democratization will not be possible in Gabon.