

AFRICA RISK CONSULTING

Country briefing – Gabon

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1 Summary

French investigative journalist Pierre Péan's new book claims President Ali Bongo Ondimba (2009 – present) is adopted and therefore ineligible for the presidency under the constitution. Members of the Bongo family dispute the claim, although the opposition files a complaint ordering Bongo to take a DNA test to prove his parentage. Gabon falls sixth places in the World Bank's annual 'Doing Business' index, confirming the deteriorating business environment in Gabon. Despite strong economic fundamentals, an International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission confirms an economic slowdown in 2014 due to a decrease in public spending. The government makes several new navy equipment acquisitions to improve maritime border security.

1.1 New book claims Bongo is ineligible to rule

French investigative journalist **Pierre Péan's** new book has divided the political class in Gabon. The book, released on 29 October and titled '*Nouvelles affaires africaines: Mensonges et pillages au Gabon*', makes several allegations which aim to undermine President **Ali Bongo Ondimba's** (2009 – present) legitimacy. Notably, the book points to Gabonese and French sources that claim Bongo is an adopted child and a native of **Biafra (Nigeria)**. The book – and Bongo's opponents – claims that he is therefore ineligible for the presidency under the constitution which excludes as president persons born to foreign parents. On 10 November the government filed a civil party defamation complaint against Péan and his publisher **Fayard** at the **Tribunal de Grande Instance de Paris (France)** over allegations made in the book. Bongo has yet to personally respond to the allegations. However, members of the Bongo clan have tried to dismiss the allegations during press interviews throughout November.

"They have not been convincing in their arguments, going from one contradiction to another on the date and period when Bongo was born."¹

¹ Source, journalist, Gabon

The family claims Bongo was born in 1959 in **Republic of Congo (ROC)**. However, sources close to the family claim that the former first lady **Josephine Kama** did not give birth to any children.

Pascaline Bongo, Ali Bongo's influential sister who manages the Bongo family's assets, gave a rare media interview to dismiss the rumours, but "*could not really convince that Bongo had not been adopted.*"² The Bongo family says that Péan has a political agenda in the context of the campaign for the 2016 presidential election.

The opposition has intensified its criticism of Bongo's rule following Péan's claims. **Jean Ping** and **Jean Eyeghé Ndong** led several opposition groupings in a protest on 13 November to demand that the justice ministry pursue a complaint they had lodged that requires Bongo to take a DNA test to prove his parentage.³ The security forces repelled the protesters and the interior ministry declared the protest illegal, further increasing political tensions. The book's claims have also reignited allegations that Bongo rigged the 2009 election. An opposition source said:

"Everything written in the book of Pierre Péan was largely known by most Gabonese elite. We want him to leave power because he is mismanaging the country."

Opposition and activists have increased pressure on Bongo to present his "*authentic birth certificate*" for the 2016 election.

*"The ball is now in the presidential camp...the nationality code says that the person whose nationality is in question must bring proof. The president is the guarantor of the laws, he must produce an authentic birth certificate to the public to prove his nationality."*⁴

All birth certificates dating from pre-1960 independence under the former French protectorate **Afrique Equatoriale Française** – which included Gabon, ROC, **Central African Republic (CAR)**, **Chad** and **Cameroon** – are posted in **Nantes** (France). However, the book claims that "*Alain Bernard Bongo*", Bongo's name at birth, is not registered there. The book – and Bongo's opponents – claim that Bongo presented a fake birth certificate for his application to run in the 2009 election that was issued a few days prior to the application in **Libreville**.

Péan has failed to provide documented evidence of his claims. These claims include allegations about Bongo during his time as defence minister under his father **Omar Bongo Ondimba** (1967 – 2009). Péan alleges that Bongo was involved in the death of former senate president **Georges Rawiri** in **Paris** (France) in 2006. Péan also claims that Bongo masterminded two assassination attempts

² Source, journalist, Gabon

³ RFI, 13 Nov 2014.

⁴ Source, anti-Bongo activist said, Gabon

against **Jean-Pierre Lemboumba Lepandou**, his father's former chief of staff, who remains a presidential adviser. After Lemboumba Lepandou joined the opposition in 2002, Omar Bongo co-opted him and he returned to the ruling **Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG)** fold.⁵

1.2 Gabon falls in 'Doing Business' rankings

The **World Bank's** annual '*Doing Business*' report confirmed the deteriorating business environment in Gabon. Gabon fell six places from 138th to 144th (out of 189 economies) in the rankings. The report is based on ten "ease of doing business" topics, which in turn include several indicators.

Gabon still claimed the best position in the unstable central Africa region due to its underlying investor friendly regulatory framework and government reforms. However, among African states Gabon was ranked 20th, and its score of 53.43 came in just above the sub-Saharan average of 51.87. Gabon ranked below **Sierra Leone** (140th) and **The Gambia** (138th) and just above **Côte d'Ivoire** (147th) and **Mali** (146th). According to the report, Gabon dropped to 135th in the 2015 report from 125th in 2014 on the "starting a business" index. It also fell 16 places on registering property, five places on getting credit and ten places on trading across borders.

1.3 ...as the IMF confirm economic slowdown

An **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** mission to Libreville from 22 October to 5 November confirmed that Gabon's growth has slowed in 2014. The IMF's **Montfort Mlachila** led the delegation which met prime minister **Daniel Ona Ondo**, newly appointed finance minister **Régis Immongault**, budget minister **Christian Magnagna**, oil minister **Etienne Ngoubou** and newly appointed mines minister **Christophe Akagha-Mba**. The IMF concluded that major macro-economic indicators remain strong:

"Gabon's growth performance has been strong over the last four years. Real GDP growth has averaged about 6% during the period 2010-13 on the back of substantial scaling-up of public investment."

However, the mission confirmed a slowdown in growth in 2014. The IMF forecast 5.1% growth in 2014, down from 5.6% in 2013 primarily due to a significant decrease in public spending to halt the deteriorating budget position:

⁵World Markets Research Centres, 26 Nov 2002.

“The adjustment in government expenditure in 2014 responded to a considerable weakening of the fiscal position caused by rapid increases in public investment spending in the past few years. By 2013 overall budget surplus (commitment basis) had virtually disappeared from a high of about 6% of GDP in 2009, and significant payment arrears had accumulated.”

Despite the slowdown, the IMF forecast robust growth in the five-year outlook, despite the expected continuing decline in oil production:

“The growth outlook remains robust in the medium term, averaging about 6% for the next five years, notwithstanding a projected decline in oil production. Growth is projected to be driven by public investment, non-oil natural resources, and services.”

1.4 Navy purchases improve maritime security

The government has moved to enhance border security and its capacity to fight transnational crime through a number of new navy equipment purchases. In November 2014, the government purchased four naval gun mounts and a remote controlled gun turret from French government-owned **Nexter Systems**.⁶ The weapons will equip its navy patrol boats and two offshore patrol vessel purchased on 29 October from French company **Piriou**. Piriou will deliver the vessels in 2015 and 2016. One of the vessels is a refurbished French navy vessel **La Tapageuse** and French training company **DCI-NAVFCO** will provide training for the vessels.⁷ The purchases are aimed at combating the increasing piracy threat and providing other maritime border protection measures. In addition, on 29 October the government also purchased 12 Nexter armoured vehicles for its battalion in the CAR, which is part of the **United Nations (UN) Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA)**.⁸

Gabon’s 5,000-strong military – including army, navy, air force, gendarmerie, and national police – is “small but well-equipped.”⁹ The **United States (US)** strategy to help boost partner nation security capacity and stability in the **Gulf of Guinea** region is one of the key drivers behind the security reinforcements. In June US marines from the **Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force Africa 14 (SP-MAGTF)** held joint exercises with counterparts from the Gabonese military, gendarmerie and the **Agence Nationale des Parcs Nationaux**.¹⁰ The SP-MAGTF is a 500-strong force

⁶ Defence web, 11 Nov 2014.

⁷ Defence web, 31 Oct 2014.

⁸ Defence web, 11 Nov 2014.

⁹ Source, journalist, Gabon

¹⁰ See ARC Briefing for Gabon, Jul 2014



based in **Spain** that reports to the **United States Africa Command (AFRICOM)** headquartered in **Germany**.

Bongo has personally backed the security reinforcements, stating his commitment to anti-terrorism initiatives at the 68th UN **General Assembly** on 24 September.¹¹ Bongo spent ten years (1999 – 2009) as defence minister under his father. However, Bongo's critics are sceptical of the defence acquisitions:

“Bongo spends a lot of money to maintain his popularity within the army and its allies. It is well-known that he is fascinated by war weapons and may use them in the event that he does not legally win an election or if he is banned from running in the 2016 election.”¹²

2 Implications

Péan has provided no documented evidence of his claims. True or not, the claims have heightened political tensions in Libreville, which have steadily increased since former chair of the **African Union (AU)** and PDG stalwart Jean Ping joined the opposition at the start of 2014. Further protests are expected, with backing from disgruntled public sector unions, which at the same time, are placing further pressure on Bongo to improve salaries and benefits. Thus, Gabon's political risk profile is expected to deteriorate in the lead up to the 2016 election.

The deteriorating economic and fiscal situation places further pressure on Bongo as the 2016 election approaches. The Doing Business report and IMF mission confirm greater business risk in 2014 which will follow the electoral cycle. The economic slowdown will place further emphasis on non-oil growth; however, this sector will continue to struggle due to reduced public spending which has driven Bongo's economic programme since he came to power in 2009.

The latest security sector developments further confirm that Gabon remains a key western partner in the fragile central Africa region. Good relations with foreign partners reduce the risk of any country-wide instability.

¹¹ PANA, 25 Sep 2014.

¹² Source, journalist, Gabon