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Following his resignation in September, Gabon's former justice minister Séraphin Moundounga accuses president Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba (2009-present) of fraud in the August presidential election. The opposition Rassemblement Héritage et Modernité (RHM) party announces that it will not take part in post-election political dialogue with Bongo. Police detain 20 employees of Echos du Nord, a newspaper favourable to the opposition, which the government claims is part of an investigation into an alleged coup plot. Workers at the Onal onshore oil field of Maurel & Prom Gabon S.A. suspend their indefinite strike, attenuating the risk of sector wide labour action.

Former justice minister accuses Bongo of election fraud

Séraphin Moundounga, Gabon's former justice minister who resigned in September (see *ARC Briefing Gabon September 2016*), on 30 October accused president **Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba** (2009-present) of fraud in the August presidential election.¹ Moundounga's criticism shows that significant tension still surrounds Bongo's contentious re-election. Moundounga resigned as justice minister on 5 September after Bongo refused to accept defeat in the presidential election.² Moundounga is now in voluntary exile in **Paris (France)**.³ In media interviews Moundounga has claimed that he became the target of kidnapping threats after he resigned when he continued to call on Bongo to resign.

*"Throughout the country, [opposition **Parti Gabonais du Peuple (PGP)** candidate] **Jean Ping** won with 60% of votes, against Bongo's 38% and 2% for other candidates... Every defeated presidential candidate today has in their hands an original paper copy of the verbal testimonies of each polling station in the country... **European Union (EU)** observers do, too."⁴*

Local commentators believe that Moundounga, as former justice minister, gives the claims more legitimacy,

*"Coming from Moundounga, former justice minister and member of the ruling **Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG)**, these fraud accusations are significant because this discredits the Bongo system, which essentially manipulated the election result in his favour. The international community also accepted this lack of election transparency, which was not firm enough to, for once, let democracy win in Gabon... For me, Moundounga's statements confirm that... Ping won the election."⁵*

Moundounga cites verbal testimonies from polling station officers in Bongo's stronghold **Haut-Ogooué Province**.⁶ Here, Bongo won an allegedly fraudulent 95.46% of votes, with a participation rate of 99.13%, approximately 40% above the national average. Moundounga claims that this is sufficient to sanction Gabon and freeze Bongo's assets,

*"We must provide security measures for the Gabonese people, who are in danger... and freeze Bongo's and his entourage's real estate assets in **Europe** and the **United States (US)**... The best*

¹ Gabon Review, 30 Oct 2016

² Gabon Review, 5 Sept 2016

³ Gabon Review, 30 Oct 2016.

⁴ Gabon Review, 30 Oct 2016.

⁵ Source, journalist, Libreville

⁶ Gabon Review, 30 Oct 2016.

way to negotiate with any dictator is to put national and international pressure on them, so that they peacefully leave the country.”⁷

The continued defiance from the opposition is leading to an increase in social unrest within the country and also from the Gabonese diaspora in Paris,

*“Bongo has lost a lot of authority and the state is struggling to manage current affairs without the need for army and presidential guard presence in order to intimidate the population. For three months, a notable increase in activism within the public is noticeable.”*⁸

... while RHM opposition party refuses post-election dialogue with government

The opposition **Rassemblement Héritage et Modernité (RHM)** party announced on 8 November that it would not take part in the post-election political dialogue that Bongo wants to organise.⁹ The announcement shows that the opposition continues to protest Bongo’s controversial re-election in August. The RHM is composed of defectors from the ruling PDG, initially known as **PDG Héritage et Modernité (PDG-HM)**, before entirely disassociating itself from the PDG.¹⁰ The RHM maintains that the Gabonese people elected Ping as president, and continues to refuse to accept Bongo’s re-election.¹¹ RHM president **Alexandre Barro Chambrier** says that to partake in the discussions Bongo must “*absolve [himself] of all his abominations*”, referring to Bongo’s alleged electoral fraud.¹² As RHM secretary general **Michel Menga** said,

*“Behind this call for dialogue from Bongo there is something unhealthy. He should stop taking Gabonese people for children, who are incapable of decrypting this situation. This dialogue is insincere as well as being inappropriate.”*¹³

Opposition parties that rallied behind Ping prior to the elections, including the PDG-HM, **Union Nationale (UN)**, and the **Parti Social-Démocrate (PSD)**, are demanding that rule of law be re-established. However, the parties appear increasingly fractured,

*“The opposition is fighting to restore rule of law, and is against the constitutional court’s decision, which ruled that Bongo was re-elected. The Bongo government is seeking to put in place a presidential majority. Meanwhile, the opposition looks divided.”*¹⁴

Bongo also faces obstacles from within the PDG,

*“The other potential drawback likely to come from Bongo’s proposed political dialogue is the absence of unity within the ruling party – there are increasingly many younger members who are seeking to take up the baton. This is what is causing dissidence within the party, which almost led to an implosion of the PDG [in the lead-up to the elections].”*¹⁵

Police detain opposition newspaper employees

Police detained 20 employees of **Echos du Nord**, a newspaper favourable to the opposition, on 3 November over an article that claimed that the government had detained intelligence services head General **Célestin Embinga**, over a rumoured coup plot.¹⁶ The detention of the journalists is an indication of broader political tensions after the disputed presidential election (see above). The article

⁷ Gabon Review, 30 Oct 2016.

⁸ Source, journalist, Libreville

⁹ Gabon Review, 8 Nov 2016.

¹⁰ Gabon Review, 8 Nov 2016.

¹¹ Gabon Review, 8 Nov 2016.

¹² Gabon Review, 8 Nov 2016.

¹³ Gabon Review, 8 Nov 2016.

¹⁴ Source, journalist, Libreville

¹⁵ Source, journalist, Libreville

¹⁶ Le Nouveau Gabon, 4 Nov 2016.

also claimed that Embinga had misappropriated government funds.¹⁷ However, the information ministry was reportedly not informed that the raid on the journalists would take place.¹⁸ Echos du Nord has a reputation for criticising the Bongo government.¹⁹ Some press sources claim that the newspaper is “close to the opposition”.²⁰ The government shut Echos du Nord down for two months after the 2009 presidential election, for publishing the ‘wishes of the nation’ after defeated opposition leader **André Mba Obame** had proclaimed himself president.²¹ Bilie-By-Nze justified the government’s actions, claiming that the police “detained”²² the journalists and did not arrest them,

“When pseudo-journalists write articles which have no basis, it is unacceptable, because if it is false, they are trying to manipulate. This is why they were not arrested, but detained, while respecting their rights.”²³

Bongo’s re-election in August has caused significant political and social tension in Gabon, while defeated opposition candidate Ping continues to make allegations of electoral fraud. Echos du Nord claimed that the government sought to gain access to the newspaper’s sources. Echos du Nord co-owner **Désiré Ename** claimed,

“Everything was done arbitrarily, in anarchy, with a vengeful spirit... In reality, they want to access our sources ... We are in a situation of transgression, which is unfortunately legalised by the authorities in place.”²⁴

Other local journalists said the raid on the newspaper was not unusual as many similar raids have occurred in the past,

*“The arrest had nothing to do with the content of the [newspaper’s] writing... Echos du Nord is used to this kind of attack and of the suspension of its publication on behalf of the **Conseil National de la Communication (CNC)** (national communication council) or from some members of the government due to its editorial line.”²⁵*

Maurel & Prom workers end strike

Workers at the **Onal** onshore oil field of **Maurel & Prom Gabon S.A.** suspended their indefinite strike on 26 October.²⁶ The strike indicates the continuing power of labour unions in the Gabonese oil sector and highlights the continuing pressures on companies while oil prices remain low.²⁷ According to the oil ministry, production at the Onal field decreased from 28,000 barrel per day (bpd) to 10,000 bpd as a result of the strike.²⁸ Workers began the strike on 17 October. The strike affected much of Maurel & Prom Gabon’s services, from base infrastructure to oil site operations.²⁹ The workers demanded that Maurel & Prom restore the jobs of 11 dismissed workers, a demand which CEO **Christophe Blanc** initially refused.³⁰ Although the workers were not members of the influential **Organisation Nationales des Employés du Pétrole (ONEP)** (national oil workers’ organisation), they did receive advice from ONEP.³¹ There were fears that the protest would spread to other companies and become a nationwide strike. There were also claims ONEP had started the labour action,

¹⁷ RFI, 5 Nov 2016.

¹⁸ Source, journalist, Libreville

¹⁹ RFI, 5 Nov 2016.

²⁰ Le Nouveau Gabon, 4 Nov 2016.

²¹ Le Nouveau Gabon, 4 Nov 2016.

²² RFI, 5 Nov 2016.

²³ RFI, 5 Nov 2016.

²⁴ RFI, 5 Nov 2016.

²⁵ Source, journalist, Libreville

²⁶ Reuters, 25 Oct 2016.

²⁷ www.nasdaq.com

²⁸ Reuters, 20 Oct 2016.

²⁹ Gabon Eco, 18 Oct 2016.

³⁰ Gabon Eco, 18 Oct 2016.

³¹ Gabon Eco, 18 Oct 2016.

“The strike at Maurel & Prom, that ONEP supported, almost became a general strike in the oil sector. The employment minister’s mediation helped calm the situation... ONEP was at the heart of this, demanding that the company stop its layoff procedure against the 11 workers.... ONEP had issued a strike warning in early October.”³²

Blanc later walked out of a meeting with the ONEP and Maurel & Prom Gabon workers.³³ Employment minister **Eloi Nzondo** intervened in an attempt to reconcile both parties.³⁴ Blanc finally agreed to reinstate the dismissed personnel.³⁵

Maurel & Prom, on 28 October, announced that it will reduce its output from 28,000 bpd to 27,000 bpd for the remainder of 2016, following the strike.³⁶ Despite the slowdown, Maurel & Prom announced a positive financial performance for the first three quarters of 2016, showing a 9% increase in revenue, to FCFA 148 billion (\$250m) from FCFA 134 billion (\$227m).³⁷ Maurel & Prom claims it has increased production by 37% – from 19,689 bpd to 26,993 bpd – over this period.³⁸

Maurel & Prom Gabon S.A. is a subsidiary of France-based **Maurel & Prom**.³⁹ The Onal field is part of the 5,608km² **Ezanga** onshore concession in which Maurel & Prom holds an 80% stake, **United Kingdom (UK)**-based **Tullow Oil** a 7.5% interest and the Gabonese government the remaining 12.5%.⁴⁰ Maurel & Prom is also exploring for oil at the onshore **Kari** and **Nyanga-Mayombé** concessions, covering 269km² and 2,831km² respectively.⁴¹

Implications

Moundounga’s accusations appear credible, especially due to his previous role as justice minister within Bongo’s government. The opposition has not maintained a firm stance against Bongo’s re-election, as it appears increasingly divided. However, if social unrest were to increase, security and operational risks for foreign investors would increase significantly, especially due to the contentiousness of the August election. With a more unified opposition, this could present a major challenge for operating during Bongo’s second mandate. Bongo’s attempts at political dialogue and reconciliation appear difficult in the current socio-political climate. Furthermore, Bongo faces a more divided PDG than in the past.

The police’s detention of Echos du Nord journalists is a further manifestation of post-electoral tensions in Gabon. The Gabonese legal system may afford Bongo the ability to stifle opposition in the media, but such actions also discredit the legitimacy of his government as commentators paint him as an oppressor of freedom of speech.

The Maurel & Prom strike presented a danger to Gabon’s struggling oil economy and has negatively impacted the company’s operations for the remainder of 2016. The full mobilisation of ONEP would have created a severe economic problem for Gabon, which remains heavily dependent on oil. The continued low price of oil will perpetuate labour tensions in Gabon, as companies are forced to respect strict expenditure targets.

³² Source, journalist, Libreville

³³ Gabon Eco, 21 Oct 2016.

³⁴ RFI, 23 Oct 2016.

³⁵ Reuters, 25 Oct 2016.

³⁶ Gabon Eco, 29 Oct 2016.

³⁷ Gabon Eco, 29 Oct 2016.

³⁸ Gabon Eco, 29 Oct 2016.

³⁹ www.maureletprom.fr

⁴⁰ www.maureletprom.fr

⁴¹ www.maureletprom.fr

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