

AFRICA RISK CONSULTING

Gabon Monthly Briefing February 2016

Gabon Summary 11 February 2016

The opposition Front de l'Opposition pour l'Alternance (FOPA) coalition elects Jean Ping as its candidate for presidential elections expected in August or September. However, tensions within the FOPA escalate as several parties and members dispute the legitimacy of Ping's candidacy. French prime minister Manuel Valls discredits the validity of President Ali Bongo Ondimba's (2009-present) election in 2009 on live television, causing the temporary recall of the Gabonese ambassador to France. France-based Axione wins a public tender to exclusively develop fibre-optic infrastructure in Gabon. Standard and Poor's Ratings Services downgrades Gabon's sovereign rating from B+ to B. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index ranks Gabon 94th worldwide.

Jean Ping's declaration of his sole candidacy exposes tensions within FOPA

The **Front de l'Opposition pour l'Alternance (FOPA)** opposition coalition has seemingly elected **Jean Ping** as its sole candidate for presidential elections expected in August or September.¹ Ping, a former stalwart of the **Omar Bongo Ondimba** (1967-2009) regime, defected to the FOPA when it formed in 2014.² Since 2014 Ping has campaigned around the country, with the support of the **Union Nationale (UN)**, the largest single opposition party (see *ARC Briefing Gabon October 2015*). Ping, a longstanding diplomat and former chairman of the **African Union** between 2008 and 2012, is largely considered the most credible opposition candidate, with the ability to bring together a broad political spectrum to challenge current president **Ali Bongo Ondimba** (2009-present).³ Since its establishment, the FOPA's purpose has been to install a single candidate to run against Bongo.⁴ However, this has proved difficult.

"The opposition has for several months been dragging its feet on the question of consensus for a single candidate."⁵

Several members of the FOPA have protested Ping's candidacy. Several local and foreign media sources reported that Ping posted on **Twitter** that he was "*officially named single candidate*".⁶ Ping had organised a meeting to elect the FOPA candidate, claiming to have invited all members of the FOPA.⁷ However, 11 of the 27 member parties declined the invitation.⁸ Of the 16 present at the meeting, all voted for Ping.⁹ FOPA president **Pierre André Kombila** – who himself faces an uncertain future (see below) – has stated that the candidacy election did not respect FOPA procedures, calling the process an "*imposture*".

"The announcement does not concern the [FOPA]. It only concerns the authors. The [FOPA] is not at all implicated by this."¹⁰

"There are 14 founding members of the FOPA. In the group that designated Ping, there were only four. Thus, 10 founding members were absent... This is a show of force."¹¹

¹ RFI, 16 Jan 2016.

² Source, journalist, Libreville

³ Source, journalist, Libreville

⁴ Jeune Afrique, 28 Jan 2016.

⁵ Source, journalist, Libreville

⁶ RFI, 16 Jan 2016.

⁷ Le Point, 19 Jan 2016.

⁸ Le Point, 19 Jan 2016.

⁹ RFI, 16 Jan 2016.

¹⁰ Gabon Actu, 15 Jan 2016.

¹¹ RFI, 19 Jan 2016.

Nonetheless, Ping defended his election, noting that he had secured a majority, and that according to the coalition charter, he is therefore legitimately the FOPA candidate.¹² Ping says that he expects the ruling **Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG)** party to set up puppet candidates to run against him and cause divisions within the FOPA, hinting that the dissenters are complicit with the ruling party.¹³ There is some validity to Ping's allegations.

*“Certain leaders of the opposition are being manipulated by the PDG, aiming to divide the opposition electorate... However, several top ranking officials have joined Ping. For example, **Michel Menga M’Essone** recently refused the role of PDG secretary general. **Louis Gaston Mayila**, several times minister under Omar Bongo... has chosen to give Ping his party’s vote.”¹⁴*

Ping expects more than one opposition candidate, as parties outside the FOPA may put forward their own.¹⁵

“There are over 50 opposition parties and individuals. There are therefore more than fifty possible candidates. To talk of a single candidate [for the opposition] is illusory.”¹⁶

In the meantime, the majority Ping-led grouping of the FOPA has elected a new president, **Philibert Anjembé**, to replace Kombila.¹⁷ However, Kombila maintains that Ping and his 16 affiliate party grouping is “*farcical*”, and that Anjembé’s statements are “*a joke*”, undertaken outside FOPA regulations.¹⁸ The FOPA will hold a civil convention on 13 February, where non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and labour unions will make Ping’s candidacy official.¹⁹ Ping remains the most likely candidate to run against Bongo, who is yet to confirm whether he will stand for the presidency.

... and French prime minister’s blunder almost causes diplomatic crisis

French prime minister **Manuel Valls** almost caused a political and diplomatic crisis due to a controversial comment on French political commentary television programme *On s’est pas couché* (“*We haven’t gone to bed yet*”).²⁰ Valls appears to have alluded to Bongo’s contentious election in 2009, stating that Bongo was not elected, “*as we understand it*”.²¹ Following the 2009 elections, three candidates – Bongo of the PDG, **Pierre Mamboundou** of the **Union du Peuple Gabonais (UPG)** and **André Mba Obame** (independent) – declared themselves the victors.²² After a three-day postponement of the declaration of the results, neither Mamboundou nor Obame accepted the results, as the preliminary voting polls had shown significant advances for both Mamboundou and Obame over Bongo.²³ Obame was outraged as the participation rate in the PDF stronghold **Haut-Ogooué** region was reportedly 80% – twice the national average.²⁴ Furthermore, electoral commission president **René Aboghé Ella** reportedly refused to release the full documents.²⁵ **Odile Biyidi**, president of **Survie**, a political NGO pushing for reform of French foreign policy in Africa, alleged that not all members of the electoral commission signed the verbal announcement of the results.²⁶ Thousands of people took to the streets to protest what they believed was an opaque and fraudulent vote.²⁷ Since the elections, the Gabonese government has threatened to sue French writers who declare the vote rigged.²⁸

¹² Le Point, 22 Jan 2016.

¹³ RFI, 16 Jan 2016.

¹⁴ Source, journalist, Libreville.

¹⁵ RFI, 16 Jan 2016.

¹⁶ Gabon Actu, 15 Jan 2016.

¹⁷ RFI, 28 Jan 2016.

¹⁸ RFI, 28 Jan 2016.

¹⁹ Source, journalist, Libreville.

²⁰ RFI, 18 Jan 2016.

²¹ RFI, 18 Jan 2016.

²² Le Monde, 4 Sept 2009.

²³ Le Monde, 4 Sept 2009.

²⁴ RFI, 4 Sept 2009.

²⁵ RFI, 4 Sept 2009.

²⁶ Le Monde, 4 Sept 2009.

²⁷ Le Monde, 4 Sept 2009.

²⁸ RFI, 12 Nov 2014.

The current issue arose after various French media sources and prominent public figures criticised Bongo and several other world political figures for attending a freedom of press march on 11 January, citing their poor freedom of press record.²⁹ NGO **Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF)** alleges that the Gabon government forced national opposition newspapers **La Loupe** and **L'Aube** in September 2015 to temporarily suspend their publication.³⁰ RSF also alleged that the government sent journalist **Jonas Moulenda** repeated death threats after he published several articles denouncing ritual crimes carried out in Gabon.³¹

The Gabon government reportedly ordered **Germain Ngoyo Moussavou**, Gabon's ambassador to France, to deliver a letter to the French prime minister's residence, **Hôtel Matignon**, asking the French government for further explanation on the issue.³² Bongo also ordered Moussavou to return to Gabon for consultation on the matter.³³

Press sources claim that relations between Gabon and France have become more complicated since **Francois Hollande's** (2012-present) **Parti Socialiste** party came to power.³⁴

*"Since Hollande's ascension to power, several disagreements have emerged between Gabon and France. The French left does not want to perpetuate the right's methods that assimilated towards exploitation of wealth of former colonies."*³⁵

Examples of increased tensions between the two countries are numerous. The most recent is the detention of Bongo's chief of staff, **Maixent Accrombessi**, and businessman **Seydou Kane** in France in 2015 (see *ARC Briefing Gabon December 2015*). At the time, Bongo said that he felt that France was trying to "attack" Gabon.³⁶

Ping supported Valls' allegation,

*"The [French] prime minister's statement pleases the Gabonese people. He ended by saying the truth, what a lot of people think in private: that Bongo did not win the 2009 elections. He would have finished third at best."*³⁷

Valls and Bongo have reportedly reconciled after a discreet meeting at the **World Economic Forum in Davos (Switzerland)**.³⁸ Valls is expected to visit Gabon within the coming months.³⁹

*"France wanted to launch an ultimatum to Bongo which seems to have separated himself from aid agreements between the two countries in the last three years... [Valls' statement], coming from France, weakens the authority of Bongo. And this is to the benefit of the opposition, who is clearly exploiting this revelation... Valls' visit to Gabon should bring things back to normal."*⁴⁰

Axione wins national fibre-optics tender

Despite vacillating political ties between France and Gabon, commercial links remain strong. France-based fibre-optics specialist **Axione** has announced that it won the public tender to solely develop fibre-optic infrastructure in Gabon, for a seven-year term.⁴¹ The contract gives Axione exclusive rights to technical and commercial development of fibre-optic infrastructure in Gabon.⁴² Axione will name its Gabonese local unit **Axione Gabon**. Axione is a subsidiary of French conglomerate **Bouygues Energies & Services**, and until

²⁹ Le Monde, 11 Jan 2016.

³⁰ RSF, 11 Sept 2014.

³¹ RSF, 9 Jan 2015.

³² RFI, 18 Jan 2016.

³³ RFI, 18 Jan 2016.

³⁴ RFI, 18 Jan 2016.

³⁵ Source, journalist, Libreville

³⁶ The Economist, 26 Jan 2016.

³⁷ RFI, 19 Jan 2016.

³⁸ Jeune Afrique, 25 Jan 2016.

³⁹ RFI, 19 Jan 2016.

⁴⁰ Source, journalist, Libreville

⁴¹ Le Nouveau Gabon, 22 Jan 2016.

⁴² Le Nouveau Gabon, 22 Jan 2016.

now, has never operated outside of France where it has installed and maintains 17 smaller scale fibre-optic installations.⁴³ The **Délégation de Service Public (DSP)** that issued the tender will incorporate local partner **Société de Patrimoine des Infrastructures Numérique (SPIN)** in the deal.⁴⁴

The deal enables Axione to act as the wholesale provider for all domestic internet operators and providers.⁴⁵ These include:

- **DIGICOM** (1% volume market share, 0% value market share)
- **GBM** (0% volume market share, 27% value market share)
- **Internet Gabon** (1% volume market share, 24% value market share)
- **IPI9** (93% volume market share, 33% value market share)
- **TLDC** (1% volume market share, 7% value market share)
- **WIFLY** (4% volume market share, 9% value market share).⁴⁶

Axione Gabon will also manage the country's international fibre-optic linkages.⁴⁷ This includes the **Africa Coast to Europe (ACE)** underwater cable. When complete, the ACE will connect **South Africa** to France via high-speed fibre-optic cabling, also connecting 17 **Western African** coastal countries in between.⁴⁸ Moreover, Axione Gabon will initiate an underground fibre-optic cable system to connect east and west Gabon, focussing on major urban areas and government buildings.⁴⁹

Axione CEO **Pierre-Eric Saint André** announced that Axione Gabon will prioritise local development, implementing a local recruitment policy as well as a training programme for employees.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Axione parent company, Bouygues Energies & Services will complete linkage works and maintenance, in addition to energy supply and cooling systems.⁵¹ Axione Gabon will also aim to collaborate with subcontractors for construction and maintenance of the lines. The company will prioritise local small and medium enterprises as much as possible.⁵²

Standard & Poor's lowers Gabon's credit rating

Ratings agency **Standard & Poor's (S&P)** lowered Gabon's sovereign rating to B from B+.⁵³ S&P gave Gabon a stable outlook for 2016.⁵⁴ S&P cited the continued decline of global oil prices and its damaging impact on the balance of trade and government budget as the main reason for its downgrade.⁵⁵ This follows a trend of devaluation of S&P ratings in all major oil-producing countries worldwide.⁵⁶ S&P has, for example, lowered many major oil-producing countries from investment grade status, including **Brazil** and **Russia**.⁵⁷ Last year, S&P significantly changed its outlook for **Nigeria** and downgraded the **Republic of Congo**.⁵⁸

S&P had already lowered Gabon's rating in February 2015, from BB- to B+.⁵⁹ Oil revenues contribute approximately 50% of the government budget, whilst the external debt level is at 37.6% of GDP in 2016.⁶⁰

⁴³ www.ariase.com

⁴⁴ Le Nouveau Gabon, 22 Jan 2016.

⁴⁵ Le Nouveau Gabon, 22 Jan 2016.

⁴⁶ Autorité de Régulation des Communications Électroniques et des Postes, 2nd Quarter Market Review, June 2015.

⁴⁷ Source, journalist, Libreville.

⁴⁸ www.ace-submarinecable.com

⁴⁹ Le Nouveau Gabon, 22 Jan 2016.

⁵⁰ InfosGabon, 22 Jan 2016.

⁵¹ InfosGabon, 22 Jan 2016.

⁵² InfosGabon, 22 Jan 2016.

⁵³ Gabon Eco, 1 Feb 2016.

⁵⁴ Gabon Eco, 1 Feb 2016.

⁵⁵ Gabon Eco, 1 Feb 2016.

⁵⁶ Gabon Eco, 1 Feb 2016.

⁵⁷ Reuters, 22 Jan 2016.

⁵⁸ Reuters, 22 Jan 2016.

⁵⁹ Gabon Eco, 1 Feb 2016.

⁶⁰ Gabon Eco, 1 Feb 2016.

Despite a predicted reduction of 7% of oil production in Gabon in 2016 due to some oil fields reaching maturity, S&P still foresees an average real GDP growth of 4.5% over the next four years.⁶¹

Corruption Perceptions Index positions Gabon 94th worldwide

Gabon saw a small decrease in its score on **Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)**. A country or territory's score indicates the perceived level of public sector corruption on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean).⁶² This year's index ranks Gabon 94th (with a score of 34) out of 168, three points lower than its 2014 score.⁶³ This makes Gabon the 22nd least corrupt African country.⁶⁴ Gabon is the least corrupt country in the **Communauté économique et monétaire de l'Afrique central (CEMAC, Central African Economic and Monetary Community)**, ahead of its regional neighbours, **Cameroon (130), Central African Republic (145), Republic of Congo (146), and Chad (147)**.⁶⁵ The rating methodology – an average of standardised ratings from 12 “*valid sources*” whose data fulfils Transparency International's criteria⁶⁶ – has since 2012 been exclusive to one year of data.⁶⁷

	2015	2014	2013	2012
Gabon	34	37	34	35
Côte d'Ivoire	32	32	27	29
Ghana	47	48	46	45
Guinea	25	25	24	24
Nigeria	26	27	25	27
Senegal	44	43	41	36

Implications

Kombila's statements show the extent of divisions within the FOPA, whose plurality has complicated the efforts towards their aim of uniting the opposition to defeat the ruling PDG party. This increasing division appears to favour the ruling party which would prefer a fragmented opposition ahead of elections in August. This is especially the case because Gabon's single round “winner takes all” elections do not allow the opposition to gather around a compromise candidate in a second round. Nonetheless, the strength of Ping's campaign appears to make him the most likely candidate to challenge Bongo, should he confirm that he will run for a second term.

If Valls' allegations were intended, it illustrates a disapproving sentiment from the current French government towards Bongo. It also shows that the French government cannot appear to turn a deaf ear to criticism of certain African leaders, who have a less than favourable reputation amongst the French public. Nonetheless, Valls' reconciliation with Bongo at Davos reaffirms that the two countries are committed to continuing their robust economic relationship. Valls' visit to Gabon may change the relatively cool political relationship between the two countries in recent months.

Axione's win of the tender shows a national willingness to uphold international communication standards. Increased external connectivity can act as a lever for further foreign direct investment, while internal connectivity can bolster education and socioeconomic development.

⁶¹ Gabon Eco, 1 Feb 2016.

⁶² Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2015

⁶³ Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2015

⁶⁴ Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2015

⁶⁵ Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2015

⁶⁶ 1) Reliable data collection and methodology from a credible institution, 2) data addresses corruption in the public sector, 3) quantitative granularity (minimum four-point scale), 4) cross country comparability and 5) multiyear data-set.

⁶⁷ Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2015

S&P's downgrade highlights once more the vulnerabilities of Gabon's overly oil-dependent economy, which will undoubtedly continue to suffer from the oil price slump. Despite this, the government is pushing initiatives such as the **Nkok** free trade zone, which seeks to further foreign investment in Gabon, and could offset – albeit only slightly – the worst of the negative impacts of oil's decline.

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