

## AFRICA RISK CONSULTING Gabon Monthly Briefing June 2016

### Gabon Summary 20 June 2016

*The ruling presidential majority launches the **Dynamique Plurielle pour Ali Bongo Ondimba**, a multi-party platform for support of President Ali Bongo's (2009-present) candidacy. Dissidence increases within the ruling **Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG)** among those who see the **Dynamique Plurielle** as an attempt to draw away their support. The government accuses main opposition candidate Jean Ping of inciting violence with a comment made at a rally referring to "eliminating the cockroaches", comparing it with a similar comment that stirred genocidal violence in Rwanda in 1994. The opposition and several NGOs claim this is a demonisation campaign against Ping, while several public media outlets have reportedly refused Ping coverage. The **Syndicat National des Magistrats Gabonais (Synamag)** (Gabonese national magistrates' union) holds a one-day strike to protest recent nominations within the **Conseil Supérieur de la Magistrature (CSM)** (Supreme judicial council).*

### Dynamique Plurielle launched to support Bongo candidacy

The ruling presidential majority on 21 May launched a new political movement called the **Dynamique Plurielle pour Ali Bongo Ondimba** to back President **Ali Bongo Ondimba's** (2009-present) candidacy in the 27 August presidential election.<sup>1</sup> Despite vocal disapproval from the opposition, Bongo maintains influence over a significant group of smaller parties, which will play a decisive role in securing his re-election. Sources say between 1,400-2,000 people attended the launch, which claimed to create a space for expression and stimulate inter-party dialogue, while presenting Bongo's successes and supporting his re-election.<sup>2</sup>

The **Dynamique Plurielle** purportedly replaces the **Mouvement Gabonais pour Ali Bongo Ondimba (MOGABO)**, a similar political movement in favour of Bongo, launched in June 2015.<sup>3</sup> At the time, the press saw **MOGABO** as a supporting structure to the ruling **Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG)**, and a means to reduce dissident tendencies within the party.<sup>4</sup> These currents of dissidence reproach Bongo's apparent detraction from the **PDG's** fundamental values and have manifested themselves more vocally in recent months with the creation of the **PDG Héritage et Modernité** in March (see *ARC Briefing Gabon March and April 2016*). This has led to increasing factionalism within the **PDG**. The establishment of the **Dynamique Plurielle** is perhaps more a support base for Bongo as a candidate, rather than a representative of the **PDG**. Some local sources interpret it as further evidence that Bongo is aiming to draw support away from his party, and towards the new political movement,

*"[Bongo] is being pushed out by adversaries and certain senior members within the PDG... The Dynamique Plurielle is causing a lot of controversy within the ruling PDG, but presents some originality in that it reunites several parties within the majority. The new political coalition already has adversaries within the PDG, as it launches its awareness campaign."<sup>5</sup>*

The **Rassemblement pour le Gabon (RPG)** party, a long-time member of the presidential alliance under former president **Omar Bongo Ondimba** (1967-2009), boycotted the launch of the **Dynamique**

<sup>1</sup> AFP, 21 May 2016.

<sup>2</sup> AFP, 21 May 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Times Gabon, 3 Jul 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Times Gabon, 3 Jul 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Source, journalist, Libreville

Plurielle.<sup>6</sup> RPG president **Paul Mba Abessole** has in the past likened Bongo's regime to that of **North Korea**.<sup>7</sup> RPG party member **Jean-Robert Endamane** declined the role of urbanism minister in Bongo's cabinet in September 2015.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, the **Centre des Libéraux Réformateurs (CLR)**, **Alliance Démocratique et Républicaine (ADR)** and **Union pour la Démocratie et l'Intégration Sociale (UDIS)** all attended the Dynamique Plurielle event, vocally supporting Bongo's candidacy.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, there is increasing concern over the potential for electoral violence in the elections,

*"People increasingly believe it possible that there will be violence during the 2016 presidential elections - the agitation in **Libreville** is very visible... [Some] even recommend that Gabonese and expatriated families evacuate from Gabon in order to avoid the torments during the upcoming election."*<sup>10</sup>

So far there have been no major violent incidents, but since the government accused the opposition of inciting violence (see below), there is notable nervousness within the government's public discourse.

### **Bongo's spokesperson accuses Ping of inciting violence**

Government spokesperson **Alain Claude Bilie By Nze** has accused leading opposition presidential candidate **Jean Ping** of inciting violence. The accusation came after a video, released on social media on 13 May, appeared to show Ping saying that he wishes "... to awaken the dead to join him in war and eliminate the cockroaches".<sup>11</sup> Ping's statement is unlikely to cause violence in Gabon but the government will use the video to discredit him ahead of elections on 27 August. Nze's statement condemned "*with the last of our energy, the talk of hatred and violence*", claiming that Ping is calling for a civil war and drawing links between Ping's comments, the holocaust and the 1994 **Rwandan** genocide.<sup>12</sup>

In response to Nze's comments, a grouping of opposition parties and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Libreville accused Bongo of trying to ignite civil strife and prevent Ping from standing as a presidential candidate.<sup>13</sup> The Gabonese have been particularly sensitive to this since President **Joseph Kabila** (2001-present) in neighbouring **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)** issued an arrest warrant to indict main opposition candidate **Moïse Katumbi** (see *ARC Briefing DRC May 2016*). Nze indirectly threatened to bring Ping to court for his comments,<sup>14</sup>

*"The majority is contemplating taking Ping to court for his 'cockroach' comment, which he employed while in rural parts of the country without considering the implications and exaggerated exploitation of the comments by the Bongo camp. The police even demanded that he present himself before the judiciary police on 3 June, which Ping ignored."*<sup>15</sup>

Critical press sources say the government is capable of undertaking a demonisation campaign against Ping in the lead-up to the elections.<sup>16</sup> Several public media outlets have reportedly refused him coverage.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, some members of the press predict that the government will try to prevent certain sections of the population from voting under the pretext of ensuring their security.<sup>18</sup> In an attempt to guarantee fair access to public media, the president of the **Conseil National de la**

<sup>6</sup> Gabon Review, 23 May 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Gabon Review, 23 May 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Gabon Review, 23 May 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Gabon Review, 23 May 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Source, journalist, Libreville

<sup>11</sup> RFI, 15 May 2016.

<sup>12</sup> RFI, 15 May 2016.

<sup>13</sup> RFI, 15 May 2016.

<sup>14</sup> RFI, 15 May 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Source, journalist, Libreville

<sup>16</sup> L'Union, 2 Jun 2016.

<sup>17</sup> L'Union, 2 Jun 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Mbandja, 24 May 2016.

**Communication (CNC)** (national communication council), **Jean François Ndongou**, and a Ping supporting delegation met on 26 May to discuss how best to represent Ping's activity in state media.<sup>19</sup> The delegation consisted of a group of signatories supporting Ping's candidacy, which was confirmed on 23 March.<sup>20</sup> The delegation showed video evidence of Ping's 'cockroach' statement that was initially shown on television on the **Télé Africa** channel, which **Gabon Télévision** later also retransmitted.<sup>21</sup> The delegation claimed the video is exaggerated and defamatory and categorically denied claims that Ping is inciting genocide.<sup>22</sup> It demanded that public television channels organise debates, which would allow counter-arguments to what the delegation deems pro-Bongo propaganda.<sup>23</sup>

### Magistrates' union protests alleged political meddling in appointments

The **Syndicat National des Magistrats Gabonais (Synamag)** (Gabonese national magistrates' union) held a one-day strike on 19 May to protest President Bongo's nominations of new members to the **Conseil Supérieur de la Magistrature (CSM)** (supreme judicial council).<sup>24</sup> The Synamag strike also called for judicial reform and increased independence of the CSM. The strike forced the temporary closure of the **Palais de Justice (PdJ)** in Libreville. Striking PdJ workers blocked all entrances to the PdJ with banners that read, "*Justice is power. Let us fight for its independence.*"<sup>25</sup> There are concerns about judicial independence in Gabon as Bongo is the chair of the CSM.<sup>26</sup> Synamag called for a ban on politicians, including Bongo, making nominations to the CSM. Synamag secretary general **Stanislas Koumba** also called a constitutional revision,

*"From now on we would like the CSM to be managed by the presidents of the high courts. This would relieve the president [Bongo] of a responsibility."*<sup>27</sup>

However, in response, government spokesperson Alain Claude Bilie By Nze denied that the president's position as head of the CSM made the judiciary less independent:

*"Gabon is not the only country where the president is at the head of the CSM. The claims will be submitted to the justice ministry, which will respond in due course."*<sup>28</sup>

Reportedly, magistrates and lawyers have both deemed recent appointments arbitrary, criticising the excessively complex architecture of the judiciary as an impediment to effective closure of cases.<sup>29</sup> The judiciary criticised the nomination of **Sidonie Flore Ouwé** as president of the court of appeal in Libreville on 10 May.<sup>30</sup> Ouwé has a reputation as an "*iron lady*", having blocked the exit of former opposition **Union Nationale (UN)** leader **André Mba Obame** in 2011 when he sought permission to leave for health treatment in **South Africa**.<sup>31</sup> Ouwé has done the same for several former prime ministers – **Jean Eyéghé Ndong**, **Casimir Oyé Mba** and current opposition leader Ping – over the last five years.<sup>32</sup> She also ruled against Ping in January 2015, accusing him of "*voluntary aggression and kidnapping*" after Ping was the purported victim of an assault (see *ARC Briefing Gabon January 2015*).<sup>33</sup> Some view Ouwé as one of Bongo's cronies, facilitating legal persecution of opponents.

<sup>19</sup> L'Union, 27 May 2016.

<sup>20</sup> L'Union, 27 May 2016.

<sup>21</sup> L'Union, 2 Jun 2016.

<sup>22</sup> L'Union, 2 Jun 2016.

<sup>23</sup> L'Union, 2 Jun 2016.

<sup>24</sup> RFI, 20 May 2016.

<sup>25</sup> RFI, 20 May 2016.

<sup>26</sup> RFI, 20 May 2016.

<sup>27</sup> RFI, 20 May 2016.

<sup>28</sup> RFI, 20 May 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Source, lawyer, Libreville

<sup>30</sup> Gabon Review, 12 May 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Gabon Review, 1 Sept 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Gabon Review, 1 Sept 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Gabon Actu, 15 Jan 2015; Gabon Review, 1 Sept 2015.

Moreover, they claim she does not meet the requirements to lead the court of appeal, and that her nomination is in direct violation of the CSM's principles, which require a president "*to have a good morality, be an independent magistrate for at least 10 years, and to have been a counsellor and president of court of appeal chamber for at least 15 years*".<sup>34</sup> Synamag president **Germain Nguema Ella** argues that this, and several other previous nominations, violates the constitution.<sup>35</sup>

### Implications

The Dynamique Plurielle appears to be a platform to draw support specifically for Bongo and his re-election candidacy. There has evidently been significant resistance to this move from within the PDG, and Bongo will need to maintain order and minimise further defections in the lead-up to elections on 27 August. The risk of dissolution of the dominant PDG is small, but initiatives such as the formation of the Dynamique Plurielle certainly do not reduce this possibility, while the movement garners significant support from smaller parties.

Ping's comments are evidently very different – both in context and intent – to those made in the lead-up to the Rwandan genocide, but do highlight an interest within government to call out potential violence. The rejection by the opposition and other organisations of what they deem a scapegoating tactic to discredit Ping suggests there may be comparatively little truth in allegations of Ping inciting violence, as Gabon has avoided large scale violence during past elections. However, the potential for reduced public media access for Ping as a result of these accusations, could seriously affect his ability to communicate with the electorate ahead of elections, and he would therefore struggle to compete with Bongo.

The striking magistrates union's ability to bring the judiciary to a halt shows the fragility of the institution, and of the state's authority over the CSM. It may be the beginning of a process of reform within the supreme judicial council, but more strike action will be necessary in order to achieve this aim.

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<sup>34</sup> Multiple sources: Gabon D'Abord, 23 May 2016; Source, journalist, Libreville.

<sup>35</sup> L'Union, 23 May 2016.

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