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President Ali Bongo Ondimba (2009-present) wins re-election with 49.8% of the vote, beating opposition candidate Jean Ping of the Parti Gabonais du Progrès (PGP) by a 1.57% margin. International actors, including the European Union (EU), the United States (US) and France, call for a re-count, following an “evident anomaly” in Bongo’s stronghold Haut-Ogooué region. Bongo won 95.46% of the vote in Haut-Ogooué, with turnout of 99.13%, almost 40% above the national average. Justice minister Séraphin Moundounga resigns due to Bongo’s refusal to publish full election results. Ping begins a case at the constitutional court, demanding a re-count of the vote in Haut-Ogooué province. Widespread Internet outages follow the election.

Presidential election results disputed as Bongo wins re-election with slim margin

President **Ali Bongo Ondimba** (2009- present) won the 27 August presidential election with 49.8% of the vote.¹ This has secured Bongo’s mandate for another seven years until 2023.² After the vote, but before the official announcement of results on 31 August, both Bongo and **Jean Ping**, the opposition **Parti Gabonais du Progrès (PGP)** candidate, declared themselves winners.³ The announcement was symptomatic of significant confusion during the election process with both candidates appearing to try to influence the final outcome. Ping claimed to have won 68% of the vote – “*the general trends indicated we are the winner.*”⁴ Interior minister **Pacome Moubelet-Boubeya** stated the day after the elections that it is illegal to pronounce election results before the official declaration.⁵ Gabon has single-round elections, which excludes the possibility of run-off elections, hence the candidate with the highest number of votes in the first round is declared winner.⁶

Ping won 48.23% of the vote, only 5,592 votes fewer than Bongo.⁷ In Bongo’s traditional stronghold **Haut-Ogooué** province, Bongo won 95.46%, with a turnout rate of 99.13%.⁸ The national turnout rate was 59.46%.⁹ The opposition cited the high turnout in Haut-Ogooué as evidence of electoral fraud.¹⁰ Reportedly, the **Commission Électorale Nationale et Permanente (CENAP)** (electoral commission) only received results from eight out of nine provinces on 27 August, excluding Haut-Ogooué.¹¹ This reportedly delayed the announcement of results from 30 August to 31 August.¹²

It had seemed likely that Ping would gain more votes in the Haut-Ogooué after many opposition candidates rallied behind him in the lead-up to the election. **Léon Paul Ngoulakia** of the **Mouvement Patriote et Républicain (MPR)** party on 21 August endorsed Ping’s candidacy.¹³ Ngoulakia joined **Guy Nzouba-Ndama** and **Casimir Oyé Mba**, of the **PDG Héritage et Modernité (PDG-HM)** and

¹ Reuters, 31 Aug 2016.

² Reuters, 31 Aug 2016.

³ Multiple sources: AFP, 28 Aug 2016; Gabon Eco, 28 Aug 2016; Gabon Review, 28 Aug 2016; Le Monde, 29 Aug 2016; Reuters, 28 Aug 2016.

⁴ Gabon Review, 28 Aug 2016.

⁵ Reuters, 28 Aug 2016.

⁶ Reuters, 28 Aug 2016.

⁷ Reuters, 31 Aug 2016.

⁸ RFI, 31 Aug 2016.

⁹ RFI, 31 Aug 2016.

¹⁰ APR, 31 Aug 2016.

¹¹ Source, journalist, Libreville

¹² Source, journalist, Libreville

¹³ BBC, 21 Aug 2016.

Union Nationale (UN) parties respectively, which announced their support for Ping on 16 August. Ngoulakia's support for the opposition appeared particularly significant because he is of the same **Téké** ethnicity as Bongo, the majority in the Haut-Ogooué.¹⁴ Ngoulakia, while addressing a crowd at an opposition rally in his native region, said there is no reason Bongo should remain favourite in his stronghold,

*"You must know that the Haut-Ogooué belongs to no-one. I am a son of this region. Therefore, you should equally trust in me."*¹⁵

Violence broke out in the capital **Libreville** soon after the interior ministry announced the results of the election. Ping's campaign leader, **Jean-Gaspard Ntoutoume Ayi**, deemed the results *"an insult to the Gabonese people"*.¹⁶ **Paul Marie Gondjout**, vice president of the CENAP and member of the opposition, refused to agree to the electoral commission's result and resigned.

*"As far as we're concerned, the opposition did not vote for the result. [The opposition] could not partake in a vote that consists of the theft of the election."*¹⁷

*"Gondjout's reaction is clear proof of the CENAP's manipulation of the result."*¹⁸

The ruling **Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG)** and Bongo also alleged electoral fraud in opposition areas.¹⁹ Press sources on 30 August reported that **Mamadi Diané**, an adviser to **Côte d'Ivoire** president **Alassane Ouattara** (2010- present), had attempted to help Ping rig the elections.²⁰ Press reports claimed that Diané sought firstly to employ hackers in Gabon to publish government data.²¹ Diané reportedly also suggested to Ping that he aim to have members of the electoral commission resign. Press sources claim to have evidence of a conversation between Ping and Diané.²² The presidency sacked Diané following the release of the reports in the media, with a press release from the presidency stating,

*"The Ivoirian presidency condemns this act of interference and reassures the authorities and Gabonese people that it has strict respect for the sovereignty of the Gabonese people."*²³

Moubelet-Boubeya later flew to Côte d'Ivoire capital **Abidjan** to meet with Ouattara, in a symbolic gesture of bilateral support.²⁴

EU observers find irregularities

European Union (EU) observers claimed that there was an *"evident anomaly"* in the election results.²⁵ The EU claimed that an analysis of the number of non-voters and blank and invalid ballots reveals irregularities in the final results of the PDG's stronghold, Haut-Ogooué.²⁶ The EU observers also noted a significant lack of transparency in Haut-Ogooué, where it noted that the results were not communicated publicly.²⁷ The EU recommended the government publish the election results polling station-by-polling station.²⁸ **Mariya Gabriel**, head of the 73-person EU election observer team stated,

¹⁴ BBC, 21 Aug 2016.

¹⁵ Gabon Review, 22 Aug 2016.

¹⁶ Jeune Afrique, 31 Aug 2016.

¹⁷ RFI, 31 Aug 2016.

¹⁸ Source, journalist, Libreville

¹⁹ Gabon Review, 28 Aug 2016.

²⁰ Jeune Afrique, 30 Aug 2016.

²¹ Jeune Afrique, 30 Aug 2016.

²² Jeune Afrique, 30 Aug 2016.

²³ Jeune Afrique, 30 Aug 2016.

²⁴ RFI, 15 Sept 2016.

²⁵ Jeune Afrique, 6 Sept 2016.

²⁶ Jeune Afrique, 6 Sept 2016.

²⁷ Jeune Afrique, 6 Sept 2016.

²⁸ Jeune Afrique, 6 Sept 2016.

“The EU congratulates the Gabonese voters who expressed their democratic determination in a process which lacked transparency... We note that the process remained opaque... During the campaign, access to media was strongly unbalanced in favour of the ruling president.”²⁹

EU and opposition observers reportedly have collected enough verbal testimonies to indicate that Ping won at least 30% of votes in Haut-Ogooué’s major polling stations, and Bongo approximately 60%.³⁰ The **French** foreign ministry and the **United States (US)** state department also published press releases that called for polling station-by-polling station publication of results, as did Ping.³¹ Not a single foreign head of state has congratulated Bongo on his victory, in contrast to the 2009 elections where France and many others did so.³² Local commentators believe that international states and multilateral institutions can put more pressure on Bongo, if necessary,

“France, the EU and the US all have means of pressuring Bongo to leave power, such as freezing his family assets and those of several people in his inner circle which made a fortune from diverting Gabonese money... France in particular could put Bongo family real estate property under seal or block bank accounts in both France and abroad.”³³

“Does Bongo have the means at his disposal to make the international community bend over backwards, which until now has been courteous in saying that he cheated? It seems unlikely.”³⁴

Commentators also believe that France would intervene in order to maintain constitutional order,

*“As a former colony and with strong commercial and political ties, Gabon remains one of few **African** countries to harbour significant French troops, both in Libreville and **Port-Gentil**.”³⁵*

Justice minister Seraphin Moundounga resigns

Following Bongo’s refusal to publish full results, justice minister **Séraphin Moundounga** resigned on 5 September.³⁶ Moundounga’s resignation is a sign of division within the PDG after the election.³⁷ Prior to this announcement, on 30 August Moundounga called for Bongo to accept defeat in the presidential election if results indicated he had lost.³⁸ Moundounga said that this statement led to his being the target of two kidnapping attempts in Libreville.³⁹ Despite this, Moundounga continued to call for Bongo to release the complete results of the elections on a polling station-by-polling station basis.⁴⁰ Moundounga claims that Bongo’s refusal to do this is the main reason he resigned.⁴¹ Following his resignation, Moundounga further criticised Bongo, and vowed to help the “oppressed”⁴² Gabonese people to “recover their sovereignty”.⁴³ Moundounga claimed that the evidence that Bongo refused the re-count shows he aimed to hold on to power by force.⁴⁴ Moundounga reiterated his fears that the security situation in Gabon is getting worse due to Bongo’s refusal to re-count the votes,

“Peace is severely threatened in our country; its security is seriously threatened ... Having noticed that on the ruling party’s side we weren’t responding to the concern of a necessary guarantee of peace, I decided to resign... If [the PDG] won the elections, why did we not accept a recount if this

²⁹ Multiple sources: Gabon Eco, 31 Aug 2016; Jeune Afrique, 29 Aug 2016.

³⁰ Échos du Nord, 13 Sept 2016.

³¹ Multiple sources: France24, 31 Aug 2016; Jeune Afrique, 31 Aug 2016.

³² Source, journalist, Libreville.

³³ Source, journalist, Libreville.

³⁴ Source, journalist, Libreville.

³⁵ Source, journalist, Libreville.

³⁶ Gabon Review, 5 Sept 2016

³⁷ Gabon Review, 5 Sept 2016.

³⁸ Gabon Review, 5 Sept 2016.

³⁹ Gabon Review, 6 Sept 2016.

⁴⁰ Gabon Review, 6 Sept 2016.

⁴¹ Gabon Review, 6 Sept 2016.

⁴² Gabon Review, 6 Sept 2016.

⁴³ Gabon Review, 6 Sept 2016.

⁴⁴ Gabon Review, 6 Sept 2016.

would assure that peace return to the country? To refuse this is almost to push the people towards revolt.”⁴⁵

Commentators see Moundounga’s resignation as a significant blow to Bongo’s reputation and traditional bases of support,

“This resignation has weakened the ‘Bongo house’ as [Moundounga] was considered one of Bongo’s right arms since 2009.”⁴⁶

... and Ping initiates constitutional court case

Ping on 8 September, initiated a case at the constitutional court, calling for a recount of the election result.⁴⁷ The constitutional court is the final legal recourse for Ping to obtain a recount of election results. While most foreign actors back a recount, they appear unwilling to intervene directly in the dispute at this stage (see above). Ping demanded a polling station-level recount solely for votes in the Haut-Ogooué.⁴⁸ Ping’s lawyer, **Jean Rémy Bantsantsa**, said the constitutional court case shows that *“Ping always respected legal procedure”*.⁴⁹

Bongo has also delivered documents to the constitutional court which he claims demonstrate the opposition’s *“violation of the electoral code”*.⁵⁰ However, as one local source states, regardless of the constitutional court’s verdict, it is clear from foreign and domestic actors that Ping won this election,

“Even if the constitutional court would absolve [Bongo] from this gross fraud in the Haut-Ogooué, it is clear that in the consciences of westerners and Africans the winner is Ping – so much so that a new count would not reverse this belief... There is a small chance that Bongo’s crusade results in people recognising his re-election.”⁵¹

The same source believes that if the constitutional court upholds Bongo’s re-election, there will be a significant risk to the country’s stability,

*“The constitutional court could, with great risk of destabilising the country and uncontrolled protest, announce Bongo the victor. This would allow Bongo family and numerous of its supporters’ interests to be protected, which have benefitted from Bongo rule for over forty years... Even the president of the constitutional court – **Marie-Madeleine Mborantsuo** – is part of the Bongo family as [Ali’s father] **Omar Bongo Ondimba** (1967-2009) appointed her.”⁵²*

Mborantsuo became head of the constitutional court in 1991, and prior to this was a mistress of Omar Bongo, with whom she had three children.⁵³ Ping has referred to Mborantsuo as the *“tower of Pisa – she always leans in favour of power”*.⁵⁴ Many opposition members criticised Ping for resorting to the constitutional court to resolve the issue, as they believe the court is politicised. Ping has responded,

“Everyone knows that [Mborantsuo] is loyal to the Bongo family. Plus, its members are named by the president. Nonetheless, we went to the constitutional court firstly to put pressure on its members’ republican conscience, and so that the national and international public opinion does not say that we did not exhaust all means to show our will to see this problem resolved in an institutional framework.”⁵⁵

The constitutional court will make its ruling before the end of September.

⁴⁵ RFI, 6 Sept 2016.

⁴⁶ Source, journalist, Libreville

⁴⁷ Gabon Review, 9 Sept 2016.

⁴⁸ Gabon Review, 9 Sept 2016.

⁴⁹ Gabon Review, 9 Sept 2016.

⁵⁰ Multiple sources: Gabon Review, 14 Sept 2016; L’Union, 14 Sept 2016.

⁵¹ Source, journalist, Libreville

⁵² Source, journalist, Libreville

⁵³ RFI, 12 Sept 2016.

⁵⁴ RFI, 12 Sept 2016.

⁵⁵ Camer.be, 13 Sept 2016.

... while Internet outages remain widespread

Since the election, Internet connectivity and social media services remain significantly impeded in Gabon.⁵⁶ The government has remained silent on the issue, which has resulted in accusations that it has collaborated with telecommunications operators to curb opposition media and communications after the vote.⁵⁷ National media outlets, perhaps due to Internet outages, or political pressure, were largely silent between 30 August and 7 September.⁵⁸ This could further indicate intentional government-backed cuts.⁵⁹ Anonymous sources speaking to the media justified the measure as it would “*reduce the propagation of false rumours and the organisation of looters on these networks*”.⁶⁰ Internet service returned only partially on 5 September, while applications such as **Facebook**, **WhatsApp**, **Viber** and **Twitter** remained blocked.⁶¹ According to reports, it appears there is limited Internet service between 06:00 and 18:00.⁶²

Implications

The credibility of Bongo’s leadership is under threat both at home and abroad. Domestically, he has lost many traditional spheres of support since several defections earlier in the year (see *ARC Briefing Gabon March 2016*). Defections have continued since the announcement of the result. The PDG appears fragile, and trust in Bongo’s leadership is increasingly sparse. Abroad, traditional support from the likes of France in particular has decreased. Moreover, no African leader has supported Bongo following his re-election. Despite a lack of support from foreign actors, there has been no active stance from these to seek to mediate the tension following elections, rather supporting Bongo’s demands for results published on a polling station-by-polling station basis. In this, however, actors such as the EU, France and the US are united, which further illustrates the extent to which Bongo has lost favour within the international community. Foreign intervention appears unlikely, though softer measures of pressure could be applied in order to coerce Bongo to accept a reversal of the result.

The resignations of Moundounga and Gondjout cast significant doubt over the legitimacy of Bongo’s re-election and the solidity of the PDG. They put into question the strength of Gabon’s institutions, though the level of scrutiny was only possible due to increased levels of communication from the CENAP, governors and observers. Meanwhile, Internet outages have obscured the steady flow of information from within the country, accentuating the risk of tension. The closeness of the election increased the risks for violence after the vote, and could increase further following the constitutional court’s ruling.

In addition to Moundounga’s resignation, Mborantsuo’s historic ties to the Bongo family put into question the legitimacy of Gabon’s judiciary and the constitutional court. The doubt surrounding the impartiality of Mborantsuo is a concern, and will increase the scrutiny on the final ruling.

⁵⁶ Jeune Afrique, 14 Sept 2016.

⁵⁷ Jeune Afrique, 14 Sept 2016.

⁵⁸ Jeune Afrique, 14 Sept 2016.

⁵⁹ Jeune Afrique, 14 Sept 2016.

⁶⁰ Jeune Afrique, 14 Sept 2016.

⁶¹ Jeune Afrique, 14 Sept 2016.

⁶² Jeune Afrique, 14 Sept 2016.

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