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The European Parliament adopts a resolution against the political situation in Gabon, which could lead to sanctions against the Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba (2009-present) administration. Main opposition leader Jean Ping reiterates that he will not take part in Bongo's proposed reconciliation dialogue, claiming "it's a masquerade". Confédération Patronale Gabonaise (CPG) (Gabonese employers' association) president Jean-Bernard Boumah confirms he will run for a second term ahead of a CPG election on 24 February.

EU adopts resolution condemning Gabon electoral process and violence

Members of the **European Union's (EU) European Parliament (MEPs)** on 2 February adopted a resolution critical of the political situation in **Gabon**.¹ The resolution could lead to sanctions against the **Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba** (2009-present) government.² The EU members of parliament adopted the resolution, which included criticism of post-electoral violence, human rights violations, arbitrary arrests, illegal detention and political intimidation.³ The resolution cites the **Mission d'Observation Électorale (MOE)** (EU electoral observation mission) report, published in December 2016, which criticised the electoral process of the August 2016 presidential elections.⁴ The resolution labels the election results as non-transparent, leading the EU to call into question the Bongo government's legitimacy.⁵ The resolution also takes into account the planned Bongo-led national dialogue (see below), and has reservations about the credibility and relevance of the initiative.⁶ The resolution urges the government to implement profound reform of the electoral framework, with a particular emphasis on the MOE recommendations.⁷ The resolution also recommends that the **European Council (EC)** initiate a consultation process, in accordance with the **2000 Cotonou Agreement**, which requires this in the case of a lack of progress in political dialogue.⁸ The resolution urges that the EC consider targeted sanctions on those responsible for the post-electoral violence and human rights abuses, as well as those undermining the democratic process.⁹

Gabonese parliament and government members were defiant in response to resolution. Ruling **Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG)** spokesperson **Clémence Mezui** said,

"[The PDG] disapproved and condemned the content of the EU resolution and finds it unacceptable that MEPs, which use only the MOE report as a support, with its questionable objectivity, feel they have the right to question the legitimacy of a regularly elected head of state."¹⁰

Government spokesperson **Alain Claude Bilie By Nzé** supported this stance,

¹ RFI, 2 Feb 2017.

² RFI, 2 Feb 2017.

³ RFI, 2 Feb 2017.

⁴ www.europa.eu

⁵ www.europa.eu

⁶ www.europa.eu

⁷ www.europa.eu

⁸ www.europa.eu

⁹ www.europa.eu

¹⁰ L'Union, 7 Feb 2017.

“The government rejects this EU resolution because once more, MEPs are not representative of the Gabonese people... Nothing gives them the right to decide who is democratic and who isn’t... Bongo did not wait for a resolution from the EU in order to organise an open, wide and inclusive political dialogue, in order to discuss ways in which we can evolve our democracy and modernise our institutions.”¹¹

On the other hand, opposition leader **Jean Ping**, who lost to Bongo in the August 2016 elections, claims that the resolution is a positive sign,

“I am very confident. We have always been patient with the international community. And we have always asked for targeted sanctions. They may take the time they will take, but they will necessarily come... We will take all measures to make sure the people’s will is respected... We will defend our sovereignty.”¹²

The **European People’s Party (EPP)**, which holds 216 of a total 751 seats in the EU parliament, proposed a resolution to act over Gabon and the **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)**.¹³ The EU has remained relatively vocal over the conduct of the election, and is therefore the focus of Gabonese opposition advocacy. The EPP argues that the report’s findings impose a duty on the EU to intervene,

“[The EU should] impose targeted sanctions on the people responsible for the post-electoral violence, human rights abuses and a sabotage of the democratic process in the country, thereby firmly condemning any attempt to stay in power against the will of the people by breaching the constitution and other laws of the country.”¹⁴

An opposition delegation on 24 January met EC officials in **Brussels (Belgium)** to appeal to the EC to demand a recount of the August 2016 presidential elections.¹⁵ The delegation included former justice minister **Séraphin Moundounga**, who resigned after Bongo refused to accept defeat.¹⁶ The delegation also claimed that the MOE report imposes a moral responsibility on the EU to act.¹⁷

Local sources do not believe targeted sanctions will have a significant impact on the Bongo administration,

*“The real implications of EU sanctions will be small, because the EU really should have reacted quicker, straight after the elections. This error [allowed] Bongo to rebuild his entourage with loyalists and to defend power whatever the cost... The potential for Bongo to corrupt leaders of the opposition is real, especially if he offers government positions. Current vice prime minister **Ben Moubamba**, for example, is a good case in point. Ping will find himself isolated... This is a very probable hypothesis if **France** does not intervene diplomatically to force Bongo to leave or reduce his power.”¹⁸*

The EU resolution is significant, as it shows high-level support for claims of electoral fraud against the Bongo administration. However, EU sanctions will not prove sufficient to force the Bongo administration to cede power. The administration could suffer economically from sanctions, however, hostility from the opposition is likely to weaken over the longer term due to Bongo’s strategy of ‘divide and rule’.

¹¹ Gabon Eco, 4 Feb 2017.

¹² RFI, 3 Feb 2017.

¹³ www.europa.eu

¹⁴ www.europa.eu

¹⁵ RFI, 25 Jan 2017.

¹⁶ RFI, 25 Jan 2017.

¹⁷ RFI, 25 Jan 2017.

¹⁸ Source, journalist, Libreville

Ping reiterates refusal to take part in dialogue with Bongo

Ping, in a radio interview on 29 January, reiterated that he would not take part in the reconciliation dialogue that Bongo is proposing to hold in **Lambaréné (Moyen-Ogooué Province)**.¹⁹ Ping's continued defiance against Bongo's political reconciliation initiative shows that Bongo continues to be unpopular among the opposition. Local sources state this may be the only opportunity for reconciliation for Bongo,

*"Political stability in Gabon could largely depend on the proceedings of Bongo's proposed dialogue at the end of February. To some extent, this shows that Bongo is reacting to some of the criticism against him. However, what the opposition really wants is for Bongo to hold a national dialogue that would allow for unity government."*²⁰

Despite Ping's continued refusal to accept the election as over (see above), the opposition appears to be divided over the issue. Opposition parties, such as the **Union pour la Nouvelle République (UPNR)** and its leader, **Louis Gaston Mayila**, are open to the proposed dialogue, but only if the **United Nations (UN)** mediates.²¹ Bongo accepting this scenario appears unlikely,

*"A UN mediation would be welcome for many members of the opposition. But the majority fears a backlash similar to the EU's resolution. Mayila is now firmly in the Bongo camp, and fails to convince other parties to partake."*²²

Bongo will seek to reconcile with more flexible members of the opposition,

*"The Bongo camp has until 20 February to elaborate the contents of the dialogue. This will include a committee that will organise the event, which should have 20 members from the ruling majority and 20 members from the opposition. How Bongo decides to go about this will determine the receptiveness of the opposition."*²³

Local political commentators believe that the dialogue will not lead to meaningful change,

*"There will be no major changes at the end of such a dialogue, especially when we know the type of political system that boasts over 50 years of bad management habits. The players at the head of the political scene never change."*²⁴

Ping remains defiant,

*"This proposed dialogue, it's a masquerade ... I will never partake in these discussions ... Everyone knows that I won the elections that took place in this country. The whole world knows this. Those in power know this. We must start by recognising this, and the rest will follow."*²⁵

Ping has already held a national dialogue, but limited only to the opposition – the **Dialogue National pour l'Alternance** (national dialogue for political changeover) – between 18 and 23 December.²⁶ Ping, at the time, called on supporters to reclaim "by any means"²⁷ his "stolen victory from the imposters which forcefully entered the head of the state".²⁸

The possibility for meaningful reconciliation between the government and opposition appears unlikely. However, Bongo may be able to tempt members of the opposition with ambitions of a ministerial role to support the cause. Opposition to the Bongo regime is not as universally fervent as

¹⁹ Gabon Review, 30 Jan 2017.

²⁰ Source, journalist, Libreville

²¹ Gabon Review, 30 Jan 2017.

²² Source, journalist, Libreville

²³ Source, journalist, Libreville

²⁴ Source, journalist, Libreville

²⁵ Gabon Review, 30 Jan 2017.

²⁶ Gabon Review, 30 Jan 2017.

²⁷ Gabon Review, 30 Jan 2017.

²⁸ Gabon Review, 30 Jan 2017.

Ping's within the Gabonese political class. Longstanding PDG dominance of domestic politics means opposition parties are more likely to concede to a proposition from Bongo.

Employers' association head will run for re-election

Jean-Bernard Boumah, president of the **Confédération Patronale Gabonaise (CPG)** (Gabonese employers' association), on 10 February confirmed that he would run for a second term at the head of the CPG in 2017.²⁹ The CPG is a highly influential organisation in Gabon and the most powerful business circle in the country.³⁰ The CPG will hold elections for the managing director role, among its members, on 24 February.³¹ So far, there is no evidence of any opposition to Boumah's re-election. The CEOs of major national business organisations sit on the board of the CPG, including:

- France-based **Véolia**-operated water and electricity utility, the **Société d'Énergie et d'Eau de Gabon (SEEG)**;
- **United Kingdom (UK)**-based **Tullow Oil Plc** subsidiary, oil operator **Tullow Oil Gabon**;
- France-based **Total S.A.** subsidiary, oil operator **Total Gabon**;
- UK-based **Royal Dutch Shell Plc**-based subsidiary, oil operator **Shell Gabon**;
- Telecommunications operators **IG Telecom** and **Airtel Gabon**;
- Transport and logistics companies of France-based parent companies, **Nécotrans** and **Bolloré Africa Logistics**;
- Major banking institutions **BGFI Bank**, **BICIG**, **Sovereign Global France (SGF)**;
- Mining companies such as France-based **Eramet S.A.**-owned **Compagnie Minière de l'Ogooué (COMILOG)**.

The CPG supports Bongo's economic policy agenda.³² Although Boumah has no direct political affiliation, he reportedly defends Bongo's PDG interests.³³ As one local source states,

*"Boumah has no official political label. However, he has strong relationships with private investment, tourism and industry minister **Madeleine Berre** who was CPG head before Boumah, and economy minister **Régis Immongault Tatagani**."*³⁴

The PDG link is through the company where Boumah is CEO – **CECA GADIS**.³⁵ CECA GADIS is a food, consumer goods and electrical materials distribution company which had over \$364m in revenue in 2015 (net profit of \$7.15m) and has over 1,500 employees.³⁶ The chairperson at CECA GADIS is **Michel Essongué** (also **Michel Essonghé**), who has close ties to Bongo. Boumah and Essongué are close allies.³⁷ Local political analysts say,

*"Boumah is close to Essongué. Essongué is a key personality of the Bongo regime. Boumah has Essongué's trust."*³⁸

Press sources describe Essongué as "a heavyweight of politics; discreet, influential and rich"³⁹ and a "political baron of the ruling party."⁴⁰ Essongué was a speechwriter and adviser to **Omar Bongo Ondimba** (1967-2009), accompanying him on trade and diplomatic missions during his presidency.⁴¹ Essongué was also a collaborator of former stalwart PDG minister under Omar Bongo, **Paul Tongui**,

²⁹ Gabon Review, 10 Feb 2017.

³⁰ Source, journalist, Libreville

³¹ Gabon Review, 10 Feb 2017.

³² Source, journalist, Libreville

³³ Source, journalist, Libreville

³⁴ Source, journalist, Libreville

³⁵ Source, journalist, Libreville

³⁶ www.cecagadis.com

³⁷ Source, journalist, Libreville

³⁸ Source, journalist, Libreville

³⁹ Jeune Afrique, 9 Jan 2013.

⁴⁰ Gabon Review, 11 Feb 2014.

⁴¹ Jeune Afrique, 9 Jan 2013.

who also served under Ali Bongo as foreign minister from 2009 to 2012.⁴² Essongué in 2014 was one of the favourites to assume the presidency at the senate.⁴³ Essongué is of **Orungu** ethnicity, most prevalent near **Port-Gentil**, Gabon's second largest city and urban area.⁴⁴ Essongué reportedly acts in Port-Gentil to help support PDG patronage networks.⁴⁵

Boumah's re-election at the helm of the CPG will act as a continuation of PDG influence on the business community. There are close links to high-level government officials with Boumah and his associate Essongué, which raises questions about political interference. There are currently no other contenders for Boumah's role.

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⁴² Multiple sources: Jeune Afrique, 15 Jun 2013; Source, journalist, Libreville.

⁴³ Gabon Review, 11 Feb 2014.

⁴⁴ Jeune Afrique, 9 Jan 2013.

⁴⁵ Jeune Afrique, 9 Jan 2013.