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The Dialogue Politique National (national political dialogue) ends after six weeks of discussions with the signature of the Accords d'Angondjé, a 60-page blueprint for political reform, including a double ballot election system and the introduction of an executive vice president. Opposition leader and defeated presidential candidate Jean Ping, rejects the accords and refuses to enter into dialogue with President Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba (2009-present). The United States (US) Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) detains lobbyist Joseph Szlavik on suspicion of helping the Bongo family evade money-laundering regulations.

National political dialogue ends

The **Dialogue Politique National** (national political dialogue) ended on 24 May, lasting over twice as long as the initially scheduled three-week period from 28 March.¹ The length of negotiations illustrates the sensitive nature of political reconciliation after President **Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba's** (2009-present) controversial re-election in August 2016 (see *ARC Briefing Gabon September 2016*). The national dialogue concluded with the signature of the **Accords d'Angondjé**, a 60-page blueprint for political reform, following discussions between 2,474 members of political parties and civil society.² The blueprint will affect all of **Gabon's** main government bodies and institutions, including the **Court Constitutionnelle** (constitutional court), **Conseil National de la Communication (CNC)** (national communication council) and the **Commission Électorale Nationale Autonome et Permanente (CENAP)** (electoral commission).³ The signatories, agreed on the following reforms:⁴

- Introduction of a double ballot system – first round with all candidates and run-off elections between the two top candidates;
- Maintaining presidential terms at seven years, with no limits on renewals;
- Reduction of senators' mandates from six to five years;
- Reduction in the number of senators;
- Increase in the length of *députés'* (members of parliament) mandates to five years;
- Introduction of a vice president;
- No ceiling for the age of presidential candidates;
- A maximum FCFA 30m (\$51,380) in funding for a ruling majority candidate's presidential election campaign, and FCFA 20m (\$34,253) for an opposition candidate;
- Change in the CENAP's name to the **Centre Gabonais des Elections (CGE)**;
- A two-year mandate for the CGE's members, renewable once;
- Transformation of the CNC from a constitutional institution to an independent regulatory authority.

Local sources believe that the political dialogue has strengthened Bongo's position significantly, *"Bongo leaves the dialogue strengthened and with the possibility to represent himself as he wishes. This is to say that the contents of the dialogue have reinforced Bongo's power and afforded him more legitimacy... Bongo managed to stall and mollify the post-electoral crisis for*

¹ Gabon Review, 26 May 2017.

² Gabon Review, 26 May 2017.

³ Gabon Review, 26 May 2017.

⁴ Gabon News, 26 May 2017.

over nine months, to the extent that even the more fierce opponents have lost their voice and some have accepted negotiations.”⁵

However, the signatories do not include the main opposition candidate in the August 2016 election, **Jean Ping**, and several other opposition members who have criticised the political dialogue. For example, **Guy Nzouba Ndama**, a defector from the ruling **Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG)** party and member of the **PDG Héritage et Modernité (PDG-HM)**, refused to participate in the dialogue as he believed it aimed to cover up electoral fraud that Bongo allegedly engaged in during the August 2016 presidential election.⁶ Ndama said,

“In the current situation, we felt that the dialogue organised by Mr. Bongo has proven solely a lure to legitimise his position as head of state... nothing has changed.”⁷

Ndama and opposition **Union Nationale (UN)** party leader **Casimir Oye Mba** have both said that the political dialogue is illegitimate and that Ping and Bongo must meet in person in order to resolve the political impasse in Gabon,⁸

“[Ping and Bongo] must close their ears to incitements from their respective hawks; go beyond themselves; make sacrifices, to get Gabon out of the impasse.”⁹

Local sources doubt that Bongo will respect the dialogue’s conclusions:

“The constitutional reform proposed by the Bongo camp will not be applied to the letter, even if the Gabonese people were called to vote in a referendum. Parliament passes many laws but they are not all applied. It is very likely that if a referendum was organised, voter turnout would be low.”¹⁰

... as Ping calls for international mediation, refusing to enter dialogue with Bongo

Opposition leader Jean Ping rejected the conclusions of the Accords d’Angondjé, deeming them illegitimate, and said on 2 June that he would not enter a dialogue with Bongo.¹¹ More conciliatory voices among the opposition have called for a “*third dialogue*” to follow Bongo’s dialogue and Ping’s **Dialogue National pour l’Alternance** (national dialogue for political changeover) held between 18 and 23 December (see *ARC Briefing Gabon December 2016*). However, Ping refused both propositions,

“It is a no. It is ‘nyet’. I refuse to [enter in] dialogue with this monster... I do not want to betray the mandate that the Gabonese people openly confided me with to save the [country].”¹²

Ping appears to be counting on a supportive international community to reverse the August 2016 process – as reconciliation with Bongo seems unlikely. The **Mission d’Observation Électorale (MOE)** (electoral observation mission) of the **European Union (EU)** in December published a report that questioned the integrity of the August presidential election result.¹³ The **European Parliament** in February adopted a resolution critical of Bongo’s re-election.¹⁴ In light of recent sanctions against the government of President **Joseph Kabila** (2001-present) in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)**, Ping is hoping for an increase in action from the EU. Furthermore, newly elected **French** president, **Emmanuel Macron** (2017-present), was also critical of Bongo in the lead-up to his election in May.¹⁵ As such, Ping is hoping to influence the international community, which he deems favourable to his cause,

“I am launching a solemn appeal to the international community for a mediation, in the aim of re-establishing the truth of the results of the August 2016 election that I won, as everybody

⁵ Source, journalist, Libreville

⁶ Gabon Review, 30 May 2017.

⁷ Gabon Review, 30 May 2017.

⁸ Multiple sources: Gabon Review, 26 May 2017; RFI, 31 May 2017.

⁹ Gabon Review, 26 May 2017.

¹⁰ Source, journalist, Libreville

¹¹ Gabon Review, 2 Jun 2017.

¹² Gabon Review, 2 Jun 2017.

¹³ Gabon Review, 12 Dec 2016.

¹⁴ RFI, 2 Feb 2017.

¹⁵ Gabon Review, 7 Apr 2017.

knows ... Bongo is the enemy of the republic, the state and the nation. He is our enemy, he does not love Gabon ... We have come to the peaks of exasperation. We have come to the end of what a people can humanely accept. [Bongo] is demolishing Gabon. He kills children, he kills his economy, he kills his administration, he kills his schools, he kills his health, he kills his culture.”¹⁶

Former education minister under late former president **Omar Bongo Ondimba** (1967-2009), **Michel Menga**, said on public television that “[Ali] Bongo missed the opportunity for appeasement.”¹⁷ Opposition **Alliance pour le Changement et le Renouveau (ACR)** president, and vice prime minister under Ali Bongo, **Bruno Ben Moubamba**, has called for de-escalation, claiming there is “*too much hatred, anger in the nation and this must cease.*”¹⁸

The tense political environment since the allegedly fraudulent re-election of Bongo in August 2016 is impeding normal political procedure in Gabon. Although Bongo has benefitted from the Accords d’Agondjé in order to legitimise his leadership among receptive members of the PDG and some opposition parties, the more radical opposition has now assumed a stance of zero compromise, which will make meaningful long-term reconciliation between Bongo and the opposition increasingly difficult. Ping will attempt to reverse support for the Accords d’Agondjé and bring Bongo into disrepute among the international community. It appears, however, that it will require extraordinary political will from the EU to push for change in Gabon.

FBI detains lobbyist accused of help Bongo avoid money-laundering regulations

The **United States (US) Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)** detained lobbyist **Joseph Szlavik** on 11 May on suspicion of helping the Bongo family evade money-laundering regulations, amid a **US Department of Justice (DoJ)** investigation.¹⁹ The FBI seized Szlavik’s assets and held him in detention. The accusations have serious consequences for Bongo, who is seeking to placate the international community after a heavily criticised re-election in August 2016 (see above). The FBI seized over \$500,000 from Szlavik’s accounts, which the DoJ alleges were used to transfer illegal funds to Bongo totalling \$8m between 2010 and 2013, often via **Switzerland**.²⁰ The FBI had already blocked the accounts in 2013, but were not able to confirm their case against Szlavik until May 2017.²¹ The DoJ’s formal accusation against Szlavik is that he operated a fund transfer service without an appropriate licence.²²

The DoJ prosecution cited e-mails between Szlavik and lieutenant colonel **Arsène Emvahou**, a close adviser to Bongo, that appear to show Bongo approved some of the funds.²³ Szlavik allegedly received a 25% commission for the work, thereby receiving \$2m from the alleged transfers from Bongo.²⁴ The US bank under which Szlavik operated the transfers reportedly queried Szlavik on the funds.²⁵ Szlavik claimed that he was helping to promote an **African** football player in the US, and was charged with making his payments in the US.²⁶ The prosecution did not reveal the name of the footballer player.²⁷ The funds were allegedly used to pay for jewellery for first lady **Sylvia Bongo in London (United Kingdom) (UK)** and **New York (US)**.²⁸ Furthermore, the funds were allegedly equally used to pay for dental fees for **Soleman Liban**, a former Bongo chief of staff.²⁹ Moreover, Szlavik allegedly made

¹⁶ Gabon Review, 2 Jun 2017.

¹⁷ Le Temps, 8 Jun 2017.

¹⁸ Le Temps, 8 Jun 2017.

¹⁹ Le Monde, 21 May 2017.

²⁰ Le Monde, 21 May 2017.

²¹ Le Monde, 21 May 2017.

²² Le Monde, 21 May 2017.

²³ Le Monde, 21 May 2017.

²⁴ Le Monde, 21 May 2017.

²⁵ Le Monde, 21 May 2017.

²⁶ Le Monde, 21 May 2017.

²⁷ Le Monde, 21 May 2017.

²⁸ Le Monde, 21 May 2017.

²⁹ Le Monde, 21 May 2017.

payments to Bongo's former wife, **Inge Lynn Collins-Bongo**.³⁰ The message from Inge Collins-Bongo to Bongo in 2013 reportedly stated,

*"Know that I appreciate your good intentions and the money you sent to me via **Derek Ashby**.³¹ Thanks for the \$50,000 but I need my money, baby! All of the \$200,000 that I told you about in my letter. Send the cash as quickly as possible via Joe [Szlavik] because my life is holding together by a string."³²*

Inge Collins-Bongo allegedly sought to blackmail Bongo through Sylvia Bongo. She reportedly admitted this in an e-mail exchange with Szlavik in June 2012,

*"You must know the reason why your friend [Bongo] was in such a hurry to pay me the money I needed ... I discreetly contacted Sylvia on **Facebook** to warn her that things would get a lot worse [if she did not receive all of the money]. She put pressure on him. Two hours after this message, you called me to tell me that the money would arrive the following day."³³*

Although the allegations against the Bongo family may not change much in the Gabonese domestic political environment, they could lead to increased isolation of the Bongo government in the US. If more conclusive evidence emerges of Bongo's involvement in money laundering, it would give foreign powers more reason to support Ping and discredit Bongo's re-election.

³⁰ Le Monde, 21 May 2017.

³¹ Source, associate of Szlavik

³² Le Monde, 21 May 2017.

³³ Le Monde, 21 May 2017.

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