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The permanent committee of the ruling Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG) announces the resignation of secretary general Faustin Boukoubi. Local media leak an internal memo from Boukoubi asking PDG members of parliament (MP) to submit proposals to redraw local electoral boundaries. Former opposition presidential candidate Jean Ping arrives in Libreville amid demonstrations to welcome his return. President Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba (2009-present) sacks Jacob Tsioba Thaty, director general of the Direction Générale des Hydrocarbures (DGH) (oil ministry's hydrocarbon directorate). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) completes a one-week staff visit to Gabon as part of the three-year \$642m extended fund facility (EFF) signed in June.

Ruling PDG secretary general resigns

The permanent committee of the ruling **Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG)** on 15 August announced the resignation of secretary general **Faustin Boukoubi**.¹ Boukoubi has not provided any explanation for his resignation, which may be linked to internal tensions within the PDG. Boukoubi had been secretary general of the PDG since 2008, overseeing the transition from former late president **Omar Bongo Ondimba** (1967-2009) to his son, President **Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba** (2009-present).² Boukoubi established a reputation as the “*president's [Ali Bongo's] man*”.³ Tension had reportedly begun to build between Boukoubi and Ali Bongo about the future direction of the PDG, due to increased domestic and international criticism of his government.⁴ Boukoubi, in a press interview before his sacking, appeared to hint that Ali Bongo is unreceptive to his opinions,

“If the president, who knows us all, who knows our past, who knows our public image and the image of the government that each of us reflects, if he is satisfied with this, then I can only take note.”⁵

Local media published on 31 July an internal memo from Boukoubi, dated 26 July, asking PDG members of parliament (MPs) to submit proposals to redraw local electoral boundaries by 25 August.⁶ The local press portrayed the memo as an attempt by the PDG to manipulate electoral boundaries to benefit the party in the next legislative elections, which will be held by April 2018.⁷ The internal memo told PDG members,

“... to make realistic proposals for redrawing electoral boundaries, by 25 August at the latest... The ad-hoc commission will examine the propositions and the executive secretariat will submit them to the government, which will retain those that may be suitable.”⁸

It is unclear whether these events were related to Boukoubi's consequent exit, however, there were already signs that he would resign. Boukoubi had in July appeared to predict his own exit, warning

¹ Gabon Review, 15 Aug 2017.

² Gabon Actu, 2 Aug 2017.

³ Gabon Review, 15 Aug 2017.

⁴ Gabon Actu, 2 Aug 2017.

⁵ Gabon Actu, 2 Aug 2017.

⁶ Gabon Review, 31 Jul 2017.

⁷ AFP, 18 Jul 2017.

⁸ Gabon Review, 31 Jul 2017.

that all high-level officials within Ali Bongo's government only act in their own interest.⁹ Boukoubi joins a long list of defectors from the PDG since Ali Bongo assumed power, many of whom served under Omar Bongo. These include:

- **Jean Ping**, main opposition presidential candidate in the August 2016 election, former husband of Omar Bongo's daughter **Pascaline Bongo**, and foreign minister from 1999 to 2008 and former chairperson of the **African Union Commission**;
- **Guy Nzouba Ndama**, of the new minor opposition **Les Démocrates** party, was parliamentary president until March 2016;
- **Alexandre Barro Chambrier**, head of the **Rassemblement Héritage et Modernité (RHM)** party, which broke away from the PDG in early 2016 to provide a political home for PDG members who had become disaffected with Ali Bongo's leadership.

Local sources believe that Bongo's uncompromising management style is the main reason for the defections,

"I think that the reason for which so many have defected or left the PDG is due to disagreement with Bongo's manner of running things. I do not think that all those who have left wanted to leave."¹⁰

The PDG central committee appointed **Eric Dodo Bounguendza** secretary general in the interim until the party's next congress, to be held at the beginning of 2018.¹¹ The tensions within the PDG have been palpable for several years, and worsened in the lead-up to the August 2016 presidential election. Confidence in Bongo's leadership appears low, undermining his authority, as he is increasingly struggling to unite dissident factions within the PDG.

...as Ping's return to Libreville leads to violence

Former opposition presidential candidate Ping returned to **Libreville** on 25 July.¹² As a result of the contentious nature of Ping's relationship with the PDG and particularly Bongo, the authorities acted quickly to suppress demonstrations to mark his return.¹³ Ping had returned from a tour in **Europe**, meeting officials in **Paris (France)**, **Berlin (Germany)**, **Geneva (Switzerland)** and **Brussels (Belgium)**.¹⁴ Several hundred Ping supporters convened at the **Aéroport International Léon Mba de Libreville** (Libreville international airport) to receive Ping.¹⁵ Ping supporters held signs that stated: "*Jean Ping president*".¹⁶ The interior ministry claimed that Ping's supporters had not requested permission to hold a protest, as police forces sought to disperse the crowds outside the airport with tear gas.¹⁷ According to the local press sources, ten of Ping's supporters were injured.¹⁸ Interior ministry spokesperson **Jean-Eric Manga** claimed that there were "*no deaths and no injured*".¹⁹ Witnesses reportedly claimed that armed and hooded men, dressed as civilians, charged at the protestors.²⁰

During his European tour, Ping called for decisive action from European governments to resolve the political impasse in **Gabon**. Ping said that European officials had been largely supportive of his

⁹ Gabon Actu, 2 Aug 2017.

¹⁰ Source, journalist, Libreville

¹¹ Gabon Actu, 2 Aug 2017.

¹² Gabon Review, 25 Jul 2017.

¹³ Gabon Review, 25 Jul 2017.

¹⁴ Gabon Review, 25 Jul 2017.

¹⁵ Gabon Review, 25 Jul 2017.

¹⁶ Gabon Review, 25 Jul 2017.

¹⁷ Gabon Review, 25 Jul 2017.

¹⁸ Multiple sources: AFP, 25 Jul 2017; Gabon Review, 25 Jul 2017.

¹⁹ AFP, 25 Jul 2017.

²⁰ AFP, 25 Jul 2017.

criticism of Bongo's re-election in August 2016.²¹ However, in a press interview in Berlin, Ping called on European governments to be more decisive in their response to Gabon's political situation,

*"We are asking everybody to watch the situation seriously. Otherwise it is non-assistance to people in danger ... We tell them, 'Look, do not come after we have all been killed by that man [Bongo].'"*²²

Amid a tense period for the PDG, it appears that the opposition and its support for Ping have not faded entirely, even if support has weakened since August 2016. Minor opposition parties have agreed to enter a coalition government following the signature of the **Accord d'Angondjé** in May (see *ARC Briefing Gabon June and July 2017*). Ping will continue to fight against Bongo's re-election, although a scenario where he is installed as president now appears all but impossible. Bongo will continue to seek to divide the opposition, offering roles within the cabinet of the prime minister, **Emmanuel Issoze-Ngondet**.

Bongo sacks director general of oil ministry's hydrocarbon directorate

Bongo sacked **Jacob Tsioba Thaty**, director general of the **Direction Générale des Hydrocarbures (DGH)** (oil ministry's hydrocarbon directorate) on 8 August.²³ The sacking of Thaty could be linked to alleged corruption and misappropriation since his appointment in December 2016. Internal sources at the oil ministry claim financial mismanagement, including alleged embezzlement totalling FCFA 3 billion (\$5.37m), led to Thaty's exit.²⁴ An unidentified individual reportedly opened an unauthorised commercial bank account with **BGFI Bank** in Gabon under the DGH's name, with alleged transfers of large sums of money to an unknown destination.²⁵ Sources with intimate knowledge of the Gabonese oil and gas sector suspect that Thaty's exit is related to the embezzlement allegations,

*"Bongo wanted to punish [Thaty] for having revealed financial misappropriation... directly linked to his oil minister **Houagni Ambourouet**. Corruption allegations have often been reported in this ministry, namely during the tenth public tender launched in October 2013 for the sale of deep offshore oil blocks. It was former oil minister, **Etienne Dieudonné Ngoubou**, now in prison, that signed the first contracts."*²⁶

The DGH is a significant agency, as Gabon continues to derive most of its budget revenue from oil sales. As one local source states, the presidency maintains close oversight of management at the DGH for this reason,

*"The DGH has always been a strategic and sensitive position at the oil ministry, and its director general always depended directly on the cabinet of the presidency as a privileged interlocutor for oil companies operating in Gabon... For example, former chief of staff at the presidency **Maixent Accrombessi** had been the privileged interlocutor of former DGH director general, **Alilat Oyima Antseleve**. These non-official transactions [for acquisition of the off-shore oil blocks] were directed from the cabinet of the president."*²⁷

The allegations against Thaty, following persistent corruption in the management of the DGH, indicate that the body faces long-term reputation issues. For investors considering entering the Gabonese oil and gas market, these allegations must be taken seriously, while the DGH's management under the presidency increases the risk that important decisions are likely to come directly from the top level, and are political as well as commercial. It is currently unclear who could replace Thaty at the DGH. The DGH will need to appoint a director general with a strong reputation in order to assuage investor concerns about corruption in the oil and gas sector.

²¹ Reuters, 21 Jul 2017.

²² Reuters, 21 Jul 2017.

²³ Africa Intelligence, 8 Aug 2017.

²⁴ Africa Intelligence, 8 Aug 2017.

²⁵ Africa Intelligence, 8 Aug 2017.

²⁶ Source, journalist, Libreville

²⁷ Source, journalist, Libreville

IMF completes staff visit

The **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** completed a one-week staff visit to Gabon on 2 August.²⁸ The IMF highlighted economic challenges in the short-term, even though it commended the government's progress in implementing the three-year \$642m extended fund facility (EFF) signed in June. IMF mission head **Alex Segura-Ubiergo** said that the near-term economic outlook remains "difficult",²⁹ with 1% growth forecast for 2017.³⁰ Segura-Ubiergo cited decreases in oil exports, fiscal revenues and a worsening of the balance of payments as the most telling signs of the negative impact of low international oil prices on the Gabonese economy.³¹ However, Segura-Ubiergo said,

*"There are some early signs that the economy has begun to stabilise during the first half of 2017. The oil sector has benefited from the recovery of international energy prices since their low point in early 2016. In addition, other resource sectors such as manganese mining, wood, and agri-business are expanding rapidly, and construction is showing greater signs of resilience than anticipated."*³²

The IMF also applauded the Gabonese government on its progress in structural reforms, especially with regard to the containment of budget expenditure.³³ With prudent fiscal management, and an improvement in international market conditions, the IMF said that the government could achieve 5% gross domestic product (GDP) growth in the medium term.³⁴ The IMF mission will return to Gabon in October for the first review of the EFF.³⁵

The PDG reportedly has a bad record on compliance with IMF programmes. As one analyst states,

*"On the whole, PDG governments have either little respected their commitments with the IMF or with difficulty. The drop in the price of oil has exposed errors in Gabonese authorities and above all their bad management of public finances."*³⁶

Local sources believe that the PDG will follow the stipulations of the EFF programme, despite the continued presence of significant social challenges,

*"The government will certainly try to respect the IMF's blueprint, even if the institution recognises that the forecasts in the short-term are delicate... Bad financial management, non-transparent allocation of oil resources, non-application of conditions stipulated by lenders and the unequal distribution of state revenues has created pockets of poverty and the marginalisation of a large share of the population."*³⁷

The Gabonese government is dependent on debt as well as foreign and multilateral aid to support its budget objectives, especially in the current climate of low oil prices. Implementation of the IMF's recommendations is likely to lead to a healthier fiscal situation. On the other hand, the population appears to be suffering from years of alleged mismanagement in government, which could worsen the social impact of implementation of the IMF programme.

²⁸ www.imf.org

²⁹ www.imf.org

³⁰ www.imf.org

³¹ www.imf.org

³² www.imf.org

³³ www.imf.org

³⁴ www.imf.org

³⁵ www.imf.org

³⁶ Source, analyst, Libreville

³⁷ Source, journalist, Libreville

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