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The European Parliament (EP) votes in favour of a resolution against the Gabonese government's alleged repression of the opposition, which could lead to sanctions against the government. The government removes a temporary travel ban on members of the opposition, a week after its introduction. The prime minister, Emmanuel Issoze-Ngondet, sacks vice prime minister and habitat minister Bruno Ben Moubamba and allegedly forces the resignation of deputy budget minister Irène Patricia Manguila Boussamba. The African Development Bank (AfDB) announces that its evaluation teams will meet with government to discuss disbursement of the second tranche of a \$1.5 billion budget support programme over the 2017-2020 period.

European parliament votes for resolution against opposition repression

The **European Parliament (EP)** voted on 13 September in favour of a resolution against the **Gabonese** government's alleged repression of the opposition.¹ The resolution could lead to sanctions against the government if the resolution compels the **European Commission (EC)** and **European Union (EU)** member states to act. The EP called on the government to respect the rule of law, human rights and freedom of expression, assembly and media access.² The EP condemned "*permanent threats, aggressions, and resorting to force*"³ in its restrictions against opposition members.⁴ The EP also called for the government to respect the opposition's right to protest peacefully, to free all illegally detained people, and end any harassment, intimidation and persecution of political opponents.⁵ Referring to the recent travel ban on opposition members, including **Jean Ping** (see below), the EP resolution states,

*"It is unacceptable that several opposition leaders, namely Jean Ping, candidate for the presidential election, be temporarily prevented from leaving the territory ... Gabonese legislation allows for application of this exceptional measure only for people who are the target of a criminal inquiry... this measure was arbitrary."*⁶

The resolution also calls on the **United Nations (UN)** to begin an inquiry into the August 2016 presidential elections, as well as for **France** – due to its strong historic ties to Gabon – to "*wield all its political and economic power on the Gabonese government*"⁷ to bring about a change in the

¹ European Parliament, "Résolution du Parlement européen sur la repression de l'opposition au Gabon (2017/2830(RSP))," www.europarl.europa.eu, 13 Sept 2017.

² European Parliament, "Résolution du Parlement européen sur la repression de l'opposition au Gabon (2017/2830(RSP))," www.europarl.europa.eu, 13 Sept 2017.

³ European Parliament, "Résolution du Parlement européen sur la repression de l'opposition au Gabon (2017/2830(RSP))," www.europarl.europa.eu, 13 Sept 2017.

⁴ European Parliament, "Résolution du Parlement européen sur la repression de l'opposition au Gabon (2017/2830(RSP))," www.europarl.europa.eu, 13 Sept 2017.

⁵ European Parliament, "Résolution du Parlement européen sur la repression de l'opposition au Gabon (2017/2830(RSP))," www.europarl.europa.eu, 13 Sept 2017.

⁶ European Parliament, "Résolution du Parlement européen sur la repression de l'opposition au Gabon (2017/2830(RSP))," www.europarl.europa.eu, 13 Sept 2017.

⁷ European Parliament, "Résolution du Parlement européen sur la repression de l'opposition au Gabon (2017/2830(RSP))," www.europarl.europa.eu, 13 Sept 2017.

government's behaviour.⁸ The EP cited the following evidence as the conditions for the resolution's conclusions:⁹

- Widespread allegations of electoral fraud, violence and security tensions during and after the 8 August presidential election;
- Repeated delays to legislative elections, from an initial date of December 2016 to April 2018;
- Evidence of arrests, assassinations and forced disappearance of several people, highlighted by international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs);
- Government security forces' alleged targeting of members of the opposition and civil society that were opposed to the ruling government, especially those in peaceful protest;
- That human rights groups repeatedly note the deterioration of government repressive measures;
- President **Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba** (2009-present) organised a national dialogue process that Ping and other high profile members of the opposition had boycotted;
- Ping's call on the Gabonese population, following the presidential election, to demand that Bongo step down;
- A travel ban introduced on 2 September against opposition members (see below);
- Several high-level Gabonese officials have been called before French tribunals for alleged participation in human rights violations and 'ill-gotten gains', including within the Bongo family;
- The EU **Mission d'Observation Électorale (MOE)** (EU electoral observation mission) report published in early December suggested the EU act (see *ARC Briefing Gabon January 2017*).

According to a Gabonese journalist, the opposition is dependent on the proactivity of the EU in order to bring about change in the political sphere,

*"The opposition is pinning its hopes on targeted sanctions from the EU. One thing is for certain, there will be no change in president for the moment, and Ping will not be instated president."*¹⁰

... after government removes temporary travel ban on opposition members

The government, on 9 September, removed a temporary travel ban on members of the opposition, a week after its introduction on 2 September.¹¹ The travel ban proved a risky and unpopular decision, as the backlash following the introduction of the ban appeared to galvanise the opposition. Furthermore, the measure also appeared to contribute to the discussion of the Bongo government's alleged repressive measures at the EP (see above). Interior ministry spokesperson **Jean-Eric Nziengu Mangala** first announced the introduction of the temporary travel ban on opposition leaders on 3 September.¹² Mangala said that the government introduced the measure as a response to alleged,

*"... inflammatory comments by Ping on 18 August, when he called for public disorder, rebellion and insurrection."*¹³

Ping's exact statement on 18 August, made at a rally, was as follows:

*"I will hold you back no longer. I enjoin you to organise, from today and without limit, until the coup leaders leave, all civic protest."*¹⁴

⁸ European Parliament, "Résolution du Parlement européen sur la repression de l'opposition au Gabon (2017/2830(RSP))," www.europarl.europa.eu, 13 Sept 2017.

⁹ European Parliament, "Résolution du Parlement européen sur la repression de l'opposition au Gabon (2017/2830(RSP))," www.europarl.europa.eu, 13 Sept 2017.

¹⁰ Source, journalist, Libreville

¹¹ RFI, 10 Sept 2017.

¹² AFP, 3 Sept 2017.

¹³ AFP, 3 Sept 2017.

¹⁴ RFI, 3 Sept 2017.

It appears that the Bongo administration was seeking to clamp down on protest movements to commemorate 31 August 2016, the one-year anniversary of the date on which widespread post-electoral violence broke out in the wake of the August 2016 presidential election.¹⁵ Reportedly, the government had also deployed police forces in all areas where protests were expected to break out, such as Ping's general quarters.¹⁶ Police forces contained the lion's share of protest concerns.¹⁷

This is not the first time the Gabonese government has introduced travel bans on opposition members.¹⁸ In 2009 Bongo imposed a travel ban on activist **Marc Ona**.¹⁹ On this occasion, the temporary travel ban impacted not only Ping.²⁰ The government also prevented two opposition members – **Union Nationale (UN)** leader **Casimir Oyé-Mba** and **Union Sacrée pour la Patrie (USP)** leader **Albert Ondo Ossa** – from boarding airplanes to **Paris (France)** and **Douala (Cameroon)** respectively.²¹ Both Oyé-Mba and Ossa were opposition presidential candidates in the August 2016 presidential election.

The government has also banned the broadcasting of privately owned **Radio Télévision Nazareth**, which aired Ping's speech, for a one-month period.²² Interior minister **Lambert Noël Matha** expounded the government's stance,

*"This is a measure which comes after seditious assertions, statements of extreme gravity made by Ping on 18 August. Ping ... called on his supporters to disturb public order, insurrection, rebellion and civil war. This is not tolerable in a state of rule of law."*²³

However, opposition members, such as **Alexandre Barro Chambrier** of the **Rassemblement Héritage et Modernité**, claimed that the measure was arbitrary and unconstitutional,

*"Our reaction seeks to denounce and condemn these iniquitous, unacceptable and unconstitutional decisions, but nothing from this regime surprises us, as they are in a logic of repression. After disrespecting the choice of the Gabonese, here is another attack on public liberties. Violations without notification, without specification."*²⁴

Chambrier claimed that as many as 20 people were detained across the country, some of whom he alleges have still not been released.²⁵ Local sources claim that opposition press in Gabon was critical of the establishment of the list of opposition members,

*"The Gabonese press and in particular **L'Union, Les Echos du Nord** and **Le Temps** covered the clumsiness of the interior ministry and especially the minister of presidential affairs, **Etienne Massard**, who took the decision to establish the list... This verbal decision made to the police was strangely not attributed to a ministerial protocol or an official decree. All this has done is increase the mistrust between the opposition and presidential majority."*²⁶

The travel ban on opposition members appears to have been the main contributor to the EP resolution. In turn, the EP may seek to actively organise support among its members to support the implementation of its recommendations. The impact of sanctions on the Bongo government cannot be understated. Sanctions could lead to significant economic damage. The internal political implications are equally wide-ranging. Sanctions against the Bongo regime would galvanise the opposition to

¹⁵ RFI, 3 Sept 2017.

¹⁶ Source, journalist, Libreville

¹⁷ Source, journalist, Libreville

¹⁸ Source, journalist, Libreville

¹⁹ Source, journalist, Libreville

²⁰ Source, journalist, Libreville

²¹ RFI, 3 Sept 2017.

²² RFI, 3 Sept 2017.

²³ RFI, 3 Sept 2017.

²⁴ RFI, 3 Sept 2017.

²⁵ RFI, 10 Sept 2017.

²⁶ Source, journalist, Libreville

undermine the stability of the Bongo government and possibly lead to opposition-backed political unrest in urban centres. The temporary travel ban policy appears to have failed in the short term, while the reverberations from the EP and opposition could have meaningful longer-term repercussions.

Issoze-Ngondet makes sensitive sackings and allegedly forced resignations

The prime minister, **Emmanuel Issoze-Ngondet**, has made significant changes to his government cabinet in the past month, including sacking a senior minister and allegedly forcing the resignation of a deputy minister. Issoze-Ngondet, according to Gabonese media, allegedly forced the resignation of deputy budget minister **Irène Patricia Manguila Boussamba** after she was mentioned in a government anti-corruption operation.²⁷ Boussamba was named in **Opération Mamba**, which the government launched following Bongo's re-election in August 2016.²⁸ The government made the announcement through social media, after Issoze-Ngondet reportedly discovered that Boussamba was implicated in the case, which focused on the business dealings of **Italian** businessman **Guido Santullo**, owner of construction company **Sericom Gabon SA**.²⁹ Santullo had allegedly given bribes to several government officials in several ministries to secure public tenders.³⁰ The implication of Boussamba in the case against Santullo was due to her former role as deputy to former economy and infrastructure minister **Magloire Ngambia**, currently in prison for her involvement in the scandal.³¹ The special service **Direction Générale de la Recherche (DGR)** (national investigative unit) questioned Boussamba on the case a few months ago, but did not charge her with any crimes.³² Santullo won several public tenders after Bongo came to power in 2009, building roads, bridges, and public buildings, securing a total of FCFA 700 billion (\$1.27 billion) in contracts between 2010 and 2016.³³ Santullo claims that the government is refusing to pay as much as FCFA 350 billion (\$635m) for the work that Sericom completed over this period.³⁴

Issoze-Ngondet made a higher level sacking just over a week later. On 7 September, Issoze-Ngondet sacked vice prime minister and habitat minister **Bruno Ben Moubamba** of the opposition **Alliance pour le Changement et le Renouveau (ACR)** party.³⁵ The exit of Moubamba from Issoze-Ngondet's government could have negative repercussions for the government's relationship with the opposition. Moubamba, despite being an opposition candidate in the August 2016 presidential election, agreed to join Issoze-Ngondet's cabinet in October 2016.³⁶ However, Moubamba had become increasingly critical of Bongo, claiming in February that Bongo's national reconciliation dialogue was "*ridiculous*".³⁷ Moubamba was openly critical of the ruling **Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG)** party's alleged domination of the discussions.³⁸ After Issoze-Ngondet's public announcement on television of Moubamba's sacking, Moubamba claimed that he had resigned before Issoze-Ngondet's announcement,

*"It is not the prime minister that got rid of me, it is me that decided to leave him by denouncing his very bad management."*³⁹

²⁷ RFI, 28 Aug 2017.

²⁸ L'Union, 2 Feb 2017.

²⁹ Financial Afrik, 30 Apr 2017.

³⁰ RFI, 28 Aug 2017.

³¹ Gabon Review, 29 Aug 2017.

³² Gabon Review, 29 Aug 2017.

³³ Jeune Afrique, 23 May 2017.

³⁴ Jeune Afrique, 23 May 2017.

³⁵ RFI, 7 Sept 2017.

³⁶ RFI, 7 Sept 2017.

³⁷ Gabon Review, 17 Feb 2017.

³⁸ Gabon Review, 17 Feb 2017.

³⁹ RFI, 7 Sept 2017.

Moubamba later issued a statement that he would rather leave government “*than be forced to commit crimes to stay in power.*”⁴⁰ Moubamba also alleged that Issoze-Ngondet employs illegal and petty tactics to sack ministers:

*“When we are head of a government, there are things that we are not allowed to do in order to settle scores with ministers we don’t like. You wish to humiliate me? Do not use disloyal and illegal means. I am starting to have enough of these methods... I did not come to government to serve as a punching ball.”*⁴¹

According to a local source familiar with internal dynamics of the Bongo government, Moubamba’s exit was inevitable,

*“Moubamba’s time was running out, as he didn’t share the majority of the government’s ideas. He had been used to showing that an opposition member had been named vice prime minister... By chasing Moubamba out of power, Bongo has made a new enemy which will grow in the opposition, although not in Ping’s camp, as they don’t want him.”*⁴²

The exit of Boussamba and Moubamba shows the tensions within Issoze-Ngondet’s cabinet. Issoze-Ngondet appears to be setting his sights on containing the more dissident members of the cabinet, such as Moubamba. Boussamba’s sacking was necessary in order to assuage criticism of the government, especially with regard to corruption. Both sackings contribute to a tense climate in the cabinet.

AfDB soon to release second budget support tranche

The **African Development Bank (AfDB)**, on 19 September, announced that its evaluation teams will be meeting with government to discuss disbursement of the second tranche of a \$1.5 billion budget support programme over the 2017-2020 period.⁴³ The second disbursement of the AfDB’s budget support will provide a significant boost to government finances in the short term.⁴⁴ The AfDB made the first disbursement in March, for a total of FCFA 131 billion francs (\$239.8m).⁴⁵ If the second tranche is a similar size to the first, the government will see a significant boost in finances, especially in the context of constrained income from domestic oil revenues. Director general of AfDB’s **Central Africa** regional development and business delivery office, **Ousmane Dore**, said,

*“Our evaluation teams will be here next week to discuss the second tranche with the Gabonese side, which will ensure financial and coordination closure with the **International Monetary Fund [IMF]** and colleagues from the **World Bank**.”*⁴⁶

The AfDB’s second tranche of funding is an important short-term measure to address the government’s budget deficit. The Bongo administration will remain dependent on external debt for much of its 2017 budget, at least until oil revenues recover or stabilise.

⁴⁰ RFI, 7 Sept 2017.

⁴¹ Jeune Afrique, 7 Sept 2017.

⁴² Source, journalist, Libreville

⁴³ Gabon Review, “Appui budgétaire : 131 milliards de FCFA décaissés par la Bad,” www.gabonreview.com, 19 Sept 2017.

⁴⁴ Source, Gabon analyst, United Kingdom

⁴⁵ Gabon Review, “Appui budgétaire : 131 milliards de FCFA décaissés par la Bad,” www.gabonreview.com, 19 Sept 2017.

⁴⁶ Gabon Review, “Appui budgétaire : 131 milliards de FCFA décaissés par la Bad,” www.gabonreview.com, 19 Sept 2017.

Planner

Apr 2018 **(Gabon)** *RFI*. Gabon holds legislative elections;

Mar 2018 **(Gabon)** *Pouvoirs Afrique*. The agreed reduction with the **Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries** of 9,000 barrels of oil production ends;

25 Nov 2017 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Press Release*. The **Radisson Blue Okoume** hosts the **Corporate Awards Gabon 2017**;

20 Nov 2017 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Press Release*. The 4th edition of the **Salon de l'Economie et du Développement Durable** (economy and sustainable development forum) begins;

19 Oct 2017 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Le Nouveau Gabon*. Gabon hosts the **Conférence Internationale sur l'Afrique et l'Accord de Paris** (international conference on Africa);

19 Sept 2017 **(Gabon)** *Jeune Afrique*. President **Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba** attends the **United Nations** general assembly in **New York (United States)**;

Chronology

14 Sept 2017 **(Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. The **Forum Maroc-Gabon** begins in **Rabat (Morocco)**;

13 Sept 2017 **(Gabon)** *RFI*. The **European Parliament** votes in favour of a resolution against the Gabonese government's alleged repression of the opposition;

9 Sept 2017 **(Gabon)** *RFI*. The government removes a temporary travel ban on members of the opposition;

7 Sept 2017 **Libreville (Gabon)** *RFI*. Prime minister **Emmanuel Issoze-Ngondet** sacks vice prime minister and habitat minister **Bruno Ben Moubamba** of the opposition **Alliance pour le Changement et le Renouveau** party;

3 Sept 2017 **Libreville (Gabon)** *AFP*. Spokesperson for the interior ministry, **Jean-Eric Nziengui Mangala**, announces that security forces have prevented the exit of opposition leader **Jean Ping** and other opposition members from the country due to alleged disturbance of the peace;

29 Aug 2017 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. State-owned **Gabon Oil Co** will sell its **Mboumba** oil field to **Russia-based JSC Zarubezhneft**;

26 Aug 2017 **Libreville (Gabon)** *RFI*. Security forces disperse a minor opposition protest;

21 Aug 2017 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Jeune Afrique*. The government raises \$200m on the international bond market;

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