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Cour Constitutionnelle president Marie Madeleine Mborantsou orders the dissolution of the Gabonese Assemblée Nationale (national assembly) and the immediate resignation of cabinet, due to the government's inability to organise legislative elections. The Centre Gabonais des Élections (CGE) elects Moïse Bibalou Koumba as its first president, for a two-year term. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects a 2.7% growth rate for 2017 and presents a positive outlook for the Gabonese economy. Strong financial results for Total Gabon and offshore discoveries by Panaro Energy show bright prospects for the Gabonese hydrocarbons industry.

Constitutional court orders immediate resignation of cabinet

The **Cour Constitutionnelle** (constitutional court) dissolved the **Assemblée nationale** (national assembly) on 30 April and instructed prime minister **Emmanuel Issoze Ngondet** and his cabinet to resign.¹ Constitutional court president **Marie Madeleine Mborantsou** based her decision on the government's failure to take the necessary measures to organise legislative elections by 28 April (see *ARC Briefing Gabon April 2018*).² These measures include the revision of voter rolls, which was to start in 2017, and the establishment of a fully functional **Centre Gabonais des Élections (CGE)**. The CGE is the newly created electoral commission that was supposed to be operational from January 2018.³

The failure to hold legislative elections in April follows two previous cancellations in 2016 and 2017. As a result, the mandates of members of parliament have expired and they can no longer carry out their responsibilities.⁴ The constitutional court has temporarily transferred the powers of the national assembly to the **Senate** until elections are held. Members of government will be directly accountable to the president, in accordance with the newly enacted Gabonese constitution. The CGE will set an election date which the constitutional court will subsequently confirm.⁵

The court's decision came as a surprise. Mborantsou is seen as an ally of the ruling **Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG)** and, by extension, the government. She has consistently passed judgements favourable to the government, including confirming President **Ali Bongo Ondimba's** (2009-present) victory in the controversial 2016 presidential elections on 23 September 2016 (see *ARC Briefing Gabon October 2016*). She also has two children with the former president, **Omar Bongo Ondimba** (1967-2009).

According to spokesperson **David Mbadinga** of the opposition **Coalition pour la Nouvelle République (CNR)**, the constitutional court's decision, as an indictment of government

¹ Gabon Review, 30 Apr 2018

² Jeune Afrique, 1 May 2018

³ Jeune Afrique, 1 May 2018

⁴ Directinfogabon.info, 1 May 2018

⁵ Directinfogabon.info, 1 May 2018

incompetence and its lack of legitimacy, is a positive development.⁶ Mbadinga also states the need for the president and government to learn from this experience and host elections as soon as possible. However, **Casmir Oye Mba**, vice-president of **l'Union Nationale (UN)**, accuses Mborantsuo of carrying out an “*institutional coup*” and granting President Bongo Ondimba “*monarchical powers*”. This allegation stems from the fact that cabinet members will now be accountable to him, in the absence of the national assembly, as the new constitution stipulates.⁷ Mba also accuses Mborantsuo of working with the government in order to prevent elections from taking place.⁸ Government spokesperson **Alain-Claude Bilie Nzie** refutes these allegations saying the constitutional court is an independent institution and its decisions must be followed.⁹ Mborantsuo also refutes the allegations, stating the decisions taken were difficult but hopes this will enable elections to take place.¹⁰

The outgoing prime minister, **Emmanuel Issoze Ngondet**, presented his cabinet’s letter of resignation on 1 May to Bongo.¹¹ Ngondet was reappointed on 3 May in order to form a transitional government, whose main objective is to ensure legislative elections take place. The transitional government will subsequently be dissolved.¹² A 41-person cabinet (including 13 women) was named on 4 May. While four ministers were relieved of ministerial duties, there was the surprise appointment of three moderate opposition members. These include **Michel Menga M’Essone**, former secretary general of **Rassemblement Héritage et Modernité (RHM)** who is the minister of housing, and **Jean De Dieu Moukagni Iwongou**, president of **l’Union et Solidarité (US)** who is the new minister of higher education.¹³ Moukagni Iwongou turned down a cabinet appointment in 2015.¹⁴ **David Mbadinga** of **l’Union des Patriotes Gabonais Loyalists (UPGL)** is the new commerce minister and brings to seven the number of opposition members in cabinet.¹⁵ Other key appointments include **Régis Immongault** moving from economy to foreign affairs ministry, while Alain-Claude Bilie Nzie will head the sports, culture and tourism ministry. Ministers in charge of budget, interior and petroleum all remain in their respective positions.

According to CNR spokesperson **Gaspard Ntoutoume Ayi**, the recent cabinet appointments are baseless and intended to divide the opposition. Ayi argues that the constitutional court dissolved the previous government because of its inability to organise elections, yet the interior minister and prime minister were reappointed.¹⁶ In Ayi’s opinion, this demonstrates the government lacks the will to have elections.¹⁷ The members of the newly formed cabinet took their oaths of office on 8 May, in front of President Bongo.¹⁸

The CGE elected **Moïse Bibalou Koumba** on 26 April as its first president, a function he will occupy for a two-year term, which is renewable once.¹⁹ Koumba is a trained magistrate with

⁶ Gabonnews.com, 1 May 2018

⁷ Jeune Afrique, 3 May 2018

⁸ Jeune Afrique, 3 May 2018

⁹ RFI, 2 May 2018

¹⁰ RFI, 2 May 2018

¹¹ Gabon Review, 1 May 2018

¹² Jeune Afrique, 3 May 2018

¹³ RFI, 5 May 2018

¹⁴ RFI, 5 May 2018

¹⁵ Jeune Afrique, 14 May 2018

¹⁶ Jeune Afrique, 8 May 2018

¹⁷ Jeune Afrique, 8 May 2018

¹⁸ RFI, 8 May 2018

¹⁹ Gabon Review, 26 Apr 2018

experience in electoral management, having headed the **Commission Nationale Electorale (CNE)** from 2002 to 2003.²⁰ The swearing in of Koumba and the nine other members of the CGE took place on 2 May at the constitutional court. The CGE was established in May 2017, following the **Accords du Dialogue Politique** (political dialogue agreement) between the opposition and PDG (see *ARC Briefing Gabon June 2017*).²¹ The CGE intends to rectify the mistakes of its predecessor, the **Commission Nationale Electorale Autonome et Permanente (CENAP)**, which received significant criticism after the 2016 presidential elections.²²

The second cabinet reshuffle of 2018 is notable for the inclusion of three moderate opposition members, increasing opposition representation to seven out of 41 cabinet positions. This can be seen as an indication of growing division within the opposition coalition led by **Jean Ping** as well as its chance of increasing its political influence.²³ M'Essone and Moukagni Iwongou belong to parties which last month stated they would take part in the legislative elections (RHM and US) (see *ARC Briefing Gabon April 2018*). However, Ping is yet to make any statements in this regard and has taken a hardline approach with respect to opposition engagement with the government, insisting he won the 2016 presidential elections. According to Moukagni Iwongou, the CNR does not have a coherent strategy in place.²⁴ It appears the inability to hold elections, while detrimental to the credibility of Bongo and the PDG, has enabled them to fragment opposition support. The opposition is clearly less organised and united than in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential elections. The constitutional court may adopt an increasingly important role as a political broker going forward. The court is demonstrating for the first time that it can take tough political decisions that negatively affect the PDG and government. Whether it will be consistent in this regard and continue to produce such judgements has yet to be seen.

IMF projects positive growth for Gabon in 2018

According to the **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** the Gabonese economy is set to generate economic growth rates of 2.7% and 3.7% in 2018 and 2019 respectively. This is an increase from the 0.8% growth that Gabon registered in 2017.²⁵ According to **Dominique Desruelle**, deputy director for the IMF Africa department, the improving state of Gabon's economy is as a result of reforms that have led to the stabilisation of public finances and the pursuit of investments in the public and private domains.²⁶

Gabon has been adversely affected by the drop in petroleum prices since November 2014.²⁷ Gabon is the fifth largest producer of oil in **sub-Saharan Africa** and derives 45% of GDP, 60% of budget revenue and 80% of export revenue from oil proceeds.²⁸ However, the **World Bank** notes investment in, and the promotion of, non-oil sectors such as manganese, wood processing and agribusiness and services are helping Gabon offset the effects of low oil prices.²⁹

²⁰ RFI, 27 Apr 2018

²¹ Gabon Review, 2 May 2018

²² Gabon Review, 2 May 2018

²³ Gabon Review, 7 May 2018

²⁴ Gabon Review, 13 May 2018

²⁵ Gabon Review, 8 May 2018

²⁶ Gabon Review, 8 May 2018

²⁷ Directinfogabon.com, 10 May 2018

²⁸ World Bank, 2017

²⁹ World Bank, 2017

Despite the positive outlook, Gabon's growth is below the 3.4% growth projected by the IMF for sub-Saharan Africa in 2018, as well its **Central African** counterparts, **Cameroon** and **Chad**.³⁰ Both of these countries will attain 4% growth rates in 2018. Gabon is still faring better than **Congo-Brazzaville** (0.8%) and **Equatorial Guinea** (-8.5%) with respect to growth estimates.³¹

Ngondet provides report on Plan de Relance Economique (PRE)

Prime minister Emmanuel Issoze Ngondet presented his report on the **Plan de Relance Economique (PRE)** on 23 April. The PRE is the government's economic recovery strategy which runs from 2017-2019 and was launched in the wake of Gabon being placed under an IMF adjustment plan on 20 June 2017.³² The report outlines that Gabon has been able to reduce its public debt from 64% of GDP (2016) to 59% (2017), which is ahead of the target of 60% set for 2019.³³

The budget deficit stands at 3.6% (2017) compared to 6.6% (2016). Ngondet says the allocation of 552 billion FCFA (\$991m) by a variety of donor institutions contributed significantly towards attaining those figures.³⁴ However Ngondet acknowledges that in the domains of employment creation, the government was only able to create 2,000 jobs while the PRE states 8,000 jobs were to be created.³⁵ Mr Issoze Ngondet blames the situation on the inability of the agricultural and services sectors to offset job losses in the construction and petroleum sectors. In 2017, the petroleum domain alone lost 3,000 jobs.³⁶

Despite the multitude of job losses in the petroleum sector and the persistently low prices in this domain, the recent upswing in petroleum prices to \$75 and \$80 breathes new life into this domain. During the first semester of activities, **Total Gabon** reports it made profits of \$23m, four times more than the previous semester.³⁷ Total Gabon will also make \$30m in investments, which is a 76% increase compared to the first semester.³⁸ In addition, **Norway**-based **Panoro Energy** conducted successful offshore drilling exercises at the **Tortue** field within **Dussafu License** in offshore Gabon.³⁹ The exercise led to the discovery of oil and other hydrocarbon bearing reserves whose quantities will be revealed later. According to Panoro CEO **John Hamilton**, the success of the exploration exercises indicates there is significant potential at Dussafu, offshore Gabon.

The positive economic outlook which the IMF outlines and the recent success of multinational firms involved in oil production indicate that Gabon is an environment which might be attractive for investment. This bodes particularly well for the petroleum sector where the rise in oil prices is likely to continue with respect to geopolitical uncertainties in the **Middle East**. Furthermore, the recent success of Panoro Energy demonstrates there are still unexplored hydrocarbons sites in Gabon.⁴⁰ Considering Gabon is in the process of establishing a new hydrocarbons code (*see ARC Briefing Gabon March 2018*) it may become a

³⁰ Directinfogabon.com, 10 May 2018

³¹ IMF Data Mapper, Apr 2018

³² IMF, 20 June 2017

³³ Gabon Review, 23 Apr 2018

³⁴ Gabon Review, 23 Apr 2018

³⁵ Gabon Review, 23 April 2018

³⁶ Gabon Review, 23 April 2018

³⁷ Gabon Review, 15 May 2018

³⁸ Gabon Review, 15 May 2018

³⁹ Directinfogabon.info, 16 May 2018

⁴⁰ Euro-Petrole, 15 May 2018

more attractive investment environment in a domain that is seeing a visible resurgence. Nonetheless, the recommendations of the World Bank and the IMF to expand investments in non-extractive domains should continue to be pursued in order to avoid past mistakes relating to the non-diversification of the economy.

Planner

June 2018 **Gabon** parliamentary session (to be confirmed);

Chronology

16 May 2018 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Directinfogabon.info*. Panoro Energy conducts successful offshore drilling exercises;

8 May 2018 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** projects Gabon will attain a 2.7 economic growth rate for 2018;

4 May 2018 **(Libreville (Gabon))** *Gabon Review*. Prime minister Emmanuel **Issoze Ngondet** names 41-person cabinet, including 3 members of the opposition;

30 Apr 2018 **Libreville (Gabon)** *BBC*. Gabon's constitutional court calls on the prime minister to resign and to dissolve the lower house of parliament because they failed to hold elections before the 30 April deadline;

27 Apr 2018 **(Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. **Moïse Bibalou Koumba** elected as electoral commission president