

AFRICA RISK CONSULTING

Gabon Monthly Briefing January 2023

Gabon Summary 10 January 2023

President Ali Bongo Ondimba (2009-present) shuffles his cabinet on 9 January, just months ahead of the 2023 general elections, appointing energy and water resources minister and deputy prime minister Alain-Claude Bilie-By-Nze as prime minister to replace Rose Christiane Ossouka Raponda, who assumes the vice-presidential role. The reshuffle and new appointments undoubtedly form part of Bongo's re-election strategy, and while he has not officially announced his candidacy, it is highly likely that he will be running. The constitutional court has dissolved the Centre gabonais des élections (CGE) (Gabonese election centre) following a complaint filed by opposition party Réappropriation du Gabon, de son Indépendance, pour sa Reconstruction (RÉAGIR), claiming that the CGE had not renewed its mandate in the required time frame. The CGE is responsible for the material and administrative organisation of elections and will be responsible for organising the 2023 elections. A landslide damages 900 metres of the Transgabonais railway on 24 December, cutting supply routes for the provinces of Haut-Ogouée and Ogouée-Lolo, causing shortages of vital goods and preventing passengers from reaching or leaving the provinces. The event highlights Gabon's over-reliance on the railway system and lack of investment in public roads.

Bongo shuffles cabinet

President **Ali Bongo Ondimba** (2009-present) shuffled his cabinet on 9 January, just months ahead of the 2023 general elections. Energy and water resources minister and deputy prime minister **Alain-Claude Bilie-By-Nze** replaces **Rose Christiane Ossouka Raponda** as prime minister.¹ Ossouka Raponda is appointed to the vice-presidential role, which has been vacant since May 2019 after Bongo dismissed former vice-president **Pierre Claver Maganga Moussavou** over a smuggling scandal. Ossouka Raponda's appointment makes her the first female vice president in **Gabon's** history.

Bilie-By-Nze is a political stalwart who has held several ministerial positions since 2006. He was a vocal supporter of the contested 2016 presidential election, defending the integrity of the process and Bongo's place as the rightful winner.² Local media outlet **Gabon Review** reported on 9 January that Bilie-By-Nze's duty as prime minister will include serving as the national campaign director of Bongo's electoral campaign.³ Bongo is yet to confirm his candidacy in the elections; however, it is highly likely that he will run, given that the elections are only seven months away.⁴ The ruling **Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG)** called on Ondimba to run for another seven-year term during a December meeting.⁵

Ossouka Raponda, who previously served as defence minister, is viewed as a Bongo ally. She was appointed prime minister in July 2020, just over a year after a coup attempt in 2019 when Bongo was on prolonged medical leave, and successfully navigated the tense political scene (*see ARC Briefing Gabon Jan 2019 & Jul 2020*). Ossouka Raponda also maintains close relationships with Bongo's mother,

¹ Jeune Afrique, 9 Jan 2023

² Jeune Afrique, 9 Jan 2023

³ Gabon Review, 9 Jan 2023

⁴ ARC Gabon analyst

⁵ North Africa Post, 26 Dec 2022

Patience Dabany, and his stepmother, **Marie Madeliene Mborantsuo**, the current president of the **Cour Constitutionnelle** (constitutional court).⁶

As the new prime minister, Bilie-By-Nze was responsible for appointing a new cabinet, which he did just a few hours after his appointment. Bilie-By-Nze appointed four ministers of state, 28 ministers and 12 deputy ministers, including three newcomers, and relieved three cabinet members of their duties, including industry minister **Pacôme Moubelet-Boubeya**.⁷ The new ministers include:

- Industrial development and small and medium enterprises: **Blaise Louembe**;
- Consumer affairs and fight against the high cost of living: **René Ndemezo'o Obiang**;
- Communications: **Rodrigue Mboumba Bissawou**.⁸

The government reshuffle and new appointments undoubtedly form part of Bongo's re-election strategy. Several younger politicians were included in the cabinet line-up, including Bissawou, likely in an attempt to garner more support from younger voters who may have viewed the previous cabinet as 'out of touch'.⁹ Bongo, by appointing old allies to the vice-presidential and prime minister roles, is also consolidating power at the top ahead of the elections. The three top leaders are likely to challenge any contestation of the election results.

Election centre dissolved

The constitutional court dissolved the **Centre gabonais des élections (CGE)** (Gabonese election centre) on 5 January following a complaint filed by opposition party **Réappropriation du Gabon, de son Indépendance, pour sa Reconstruction (RÉAGIR)**, which claimed that the CGE had not renewed its mandate in the required time frame.¹⁰ The CGE is responsible for the material and administrative organisation of elections and will be responsible for organising the 2023 elections.

The CGE, chaired by **Moïse Bibalou Koumbafor**, was established in April 2018 for a two-year mandate with the possibility of being renewed once. However, the **Covid-19** pandemic meant that the CGE was unable to renew its mandate, and its mandate was automatically extended in June 2020.¹¹ The extension of the CGE's mandate expired in June 2022 but the CGE took no action to renew its mandate or establish a new mandate, leading to RÉAGIR's complaint.¹²

The CGE's role formed a central part of recommendations for a transparent election made by opposition parties to the constitutional court in June 2022. The recommendations included the transfer of all powers related to electoral matters to the CGE, the publication of election lists on the CGE website and the appointment of the president of the CGE and heads of its branches according to party representation.¹³ The CGE is made up of five members from the ruling PDG and five members of the opposition.

The constitutional court ruled that the new CGE office and mandate must be established within 30 days from the ruling, leaving four members of the dissolved CGE to take care of the current affairs in the interim. Given the central role that opposition parties want it to play, the CGE's legality and legitimacy ahead of the elections will be vital in ensuring that the elections are considered free, fair and transparent. There will be pressure for the CGE to move as quickly as possible to renew its mandate as an electoral crisis could loom should its role not be reinstated.

Rail traffic suspension causes chaos

A landslide that damaged 900 metres of the **Transgabonais** railway on 24 December has cut supply routes for the provinces of **Haut-Ogouée** and **Ogouée-Lolo**, causing shortages of vital goods and

⁶ ARC Gabon source

⁷ Le Nouveau Gabon, 10 Jan 2023

⁸ Direct Infos Gabon, 9 Jan 2023

⁹ Agence Ecofin, 9 Jan 2023

¹⁰ Le Nouveau Gabon, 6 Jan 2023

¹¹ Anadolu Agency, 6 Jan 2023

¹² Le Nouveau Gabon, 6 Jan 2023

¹³ Gabon review, 23 Jun 2022

preventing passengers from reaching or leaving the provinces. Authorities announced on 30 December that service stations would need to limit to the amount of fuel it sells to 10,000 FCFA (\$16.36) per customer while supermarkets have run out of goods, causing prices of available goods to skyrocket.¹⁴ Schools in Haut-Ogouée suspended classes on 9 January until 14 January given the shortage of fuel in the province and the difficulties in getting learners to school.¹⁵

President Bongo ordered the intervention of the defence and security forces on 5 January, allowing them to airlift supplies, mainly food, to the two provinces.¹⁶ The air force delivered 3.5 tonnes of goods including baby food, oil and flour on 7 January and 3.5 tonnes of medical supplies on 8 January to the two provinces.

Société d'Exploitation du Transgabonais (SETRAG) general manager **Christian Magni** told a press conference on 26 December that the resumption of railway services would take a while as authorities not only need to clear the landslide and debris but also conduct additional studies to determine the likelihood of such an event re-occurring.¹⁷ SETRAG announced via a press release that railway services will gradually resume in the second half of January, but until then, economic activity in several provinces will remain impacted.

Public works minister **Toussaint Nkouma Emame** stated on 28 December that the government had allocated an unspecified amount to rehabilitate two road sections – **Koumameyong-Booué** and **Alembé-Lopé-Mikouyi** – to help compensate for the suspension of railway services.¹⁸ However, how long these rehabilitation works will take remains unknown, and with few alternative measures, the transport of goods and people in the country will slow down significantly. The event has highlighted the over-reliance of authorities and provinces on the railway system, and the need for the government to direct additional funds to improving the road system in the country.

¹⁴ RFI, 7 Jan 2023; Le Nouveau Gabon, 2 Jan 2023

¹⁵ Le Nouveau Gabon, 9 Jan 2023

¹⁶ Le Nouveau Gabon, 7 Jan 2023

¹⁷ Le Nouveau Gabon, 28 Dec 2022

¹⁸ Gabon Review, 28 Dec 2022

Planner

Aug 2023 **(Gabon)** Local, national assembly and presidential elections

Chronology

- 9 Jan 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. **Norway**-headquartered **BW Energy** and **United Kingdom**-headquartered **Panoro Energy** launch production of the **Hibiscus/Ruche** phase one development with the first oil expected in March;
- 4 Jan 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. A joint task force from the water and forests ministry and **Belgium**-based nongovernmental organisation **Conservation Justice** identifies four illegal logging sites in **Bitam** (northern **Gabon**) and arrests a **Cameroonian** national leading two operations;
- 28 Dec 2022 **Gamba (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. Social media users accuse **United Kingdom** oil company **Assala Energy** of dumping toxic waste into the **Gamba River**, an accusation the company refutes;
- 27 Dec 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Sika Finance*. **French** energy giant **TotalEnergies**, through its subsidiary **TotalEnergies EP Gabon**, signs an agreement with the Gabonese government extending its involvement in the country to 2042;
- 26 Dec 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. Citizen coalition **Copil Citoyen** files a case with the constitutional court regarding the cost of the 2023 presidential election, set to cost 100 billion FCFA (\$162.5m);
- 26 Dec 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *RFI*. Government launches an initiative titled ‘Zéro casse en 2023’ (Zero breakage in 2023) ahead of the 2023 elections to prevent any possible violence post-election;
- 23 Dec 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Le Nouveau Gabon*. **Turkish-Azerbaijani** oil group **Yug-Negtegaz Private Limited** expresses interest in oil blocks for sale in **Gabon**;
- 22 Dec 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Le Nouveau Gabon*. President **Ali Bongo Ondimba** meets with his **Angolan** counterpart, **João Lourenço**, to discuss revitalisation of political, diplomatic and economic ties;
- 20 Dec 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Le Nouveau Gabon*. President **Ali Bongo Ondimba** receives the **Vatican** secretary of state, Cardinal **Pietro Parolin**, and extends an invitation to **Pope Francis** to visit **Gabon**;
- 19 Dec 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. Oil production increases by 7.3% in Q3 compared to Q2 due to the exploitation of new oil wells and the relaxation of the **Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)** quota policy;
- 19 Dec 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. Oil minister **Vincent de Paul Massassa** confirms that of the 75 oil blocks put up for tender, only a third are garnering interest;
- 16 Dec 2022 **Washington (United States)** *Agence Ecofin*. **United States** pledges \$165m to support elections and good governance in six **African** countries holding elections in 2023, including **Gabon**;
- 15 Dec 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. **United Nations** and **Gabon** sign a new cooperation framework to help achieve the **2030 Agenda** related to sustainable development goals;
- 13 Dec 2022 **Riyadh (Saudi Arabia)** *Le Nouveau Gabon*. Foreign affairs minister **Michaël Moussa-Adomo** visits his **Saudi** counterpart, **Faycal Bin Farhan**, where the two agree to hold a joint cooperation commission in 2023;
- 12 Dec 2022 **Washington (United States)** *Le Nouveau Gabon*. President **Ali Bongo Ondimba** arrives in **Washington** for the **United States-Africa** summit;

9 Dec 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Le Nouveau Gabon*. **South Korea** and **Gabon** sign a framework agreement for cooperation on climate change;

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