

AFRICA RISK CONSULTING

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Gabon Summary 14 January 2022

President Ali Bongo Ondimba (2009-present) delivers an optimistic year-end speech, pledging to create more job opportunities for Gabon's youth, and uninterrupted water and electricity supply by 2023. Bongo confirms that Gabon will become a member of the Commonwealth of Nations in 2022. Economy and recovery minister Nicole Jeanine Roboty Mbou projects Gabon will experience 3.3% growth in gross domestic product (GDP) from 2022 to 2024. The Gabonese state has signed a 20-year concession agreement with the Société d'Énergie et d'Eau du Gabon (SEEG) to carry out the production, transmission and distribution of electricity and drinking water in Gabon. The Cour Constitutionnelle (constitutional court) issues two decisions suspending the government's introduction of vaccine passports and monetisation of PCR tests, following a request for their withdrawal by civic action group COPIL Citoyen. Health minister Dr. Guy Patrick Ndong Obiang says Gabon is in the midst of a fourth wave of Covid-19 infections.

Bongo upbeat in year-end speech ...

President **Ali Bongo Ondimba** (2009-present) delivered his traditional end-of-year address on 31 December, touching on topics related to health, society, business, economics and diplomacy amongst others.¹ The speech gave an overview of developments that took place over the course of 2021 and an idea of the government's agenda for 2022.² Bongo acknowledged the disruption caused by the **Covid-19** pandemic over the past two years, noting the state's efforts to address the health crisis and its multi-dimensional impact on society.³ Bongo thanked the Gabonese people for demonstrating courage, resilience and adaptability since the onset of Covid-19.⁴

Bongo noted the importance of vaccination against Covid-19 and said he was encouraged by the recent uptick in vaccination rates, pledging that higher immunisation rates would lead to the easing of Covid-19 restrictions, possibly between April and June this year.⁵ Bongo addressed the issue of vaccine hesitancy, advising the population not to pander to conspiracy theories and condemning recent strike action by education and financial sector professionals as counterproductive to the functioning of the state.⁶

Bongo recognised the daily challenges faced by Gabonese with respect to water and electricity cuts, the rising cost of living, inflation, flooding, poor waste management and mobility, calling on the population not to ignore the progress achieved by the government over the last year.⁷ Bongo referred to the implementation of Gabon's 2021-2023 economic development agenda, the **Plan d'Accélération de la Transformation (PAT)**, which aims to improve lives and livelihoods. Bongo also alluded to large-scale infrastructure projects that have been launched or reactivated in the domains of electricity and water provision.⁸ These include the **Kinguélé Aval** hydroelectric dam, the solar power plant in **Ngounié** and the **Programme Intégré pour l'Alimentation en Eau Potable et l'Assainissement de Libreville (PIAEPAL)** (Libreville integrated drinking water supply and

¹ Gabon Media Time, 31 Dec 2021

² ARC Gabon analyst

³ Gabon Media Time, 31 Dec 2021

⁴ Gabon Media Time, 31 Dec 2021

⁵ Gabon Media Time, 31 Dec 2021

⁶ Gabon Media Time, 31 Dec 2021

⁷ Gabon Media Time, 31 Dec 2021

⁸ Gabon Media Time, 31 Dec 2021

sanitation programme) amongst others.⁹ Bongo said the completion of these initiatives will give Gabonese uninterrupted access to electricity and water by 2023.¹⁰ Bongo also referred to the construction of several road networks in Libreville, **Owendo, Oyem, Port-Gentil, Mouila, Tchibonga** and **Makoko**, as well as the 780-km **Transgabonaise** highway, which will connect eastern and western Gabon and give access to the interior of the country.¹¹

Turning to employment and training, Bongo promised to ensure that Gabon has a more qualified workforce.¹² This entails the reform of the technical and vocational education system, making sure that training matches the needs of the job market and facilitates the integration of youth into professional spheres. A related objective is Bongo's aim to improve the business environment and make Gabon an attractive destination for investors. Bongo cited the launch of energy projects and the creation of the **Zone d'Investissement Spécial (ZIS) d'Ikolo** (Ikolo special investment zone), which will specialise in promoting agriculture and timber activities. Bongo said the mining sector will also receive more attention, with the **Belinga** iron ore deposit set to become Gabon's flagship industrial project. Other domains slated for promotion and optimisation include the digital economy, fisheries and the hydrocarbons sector. Bongo concluded his address by announcing that Gabon will in 2022 be confirmed as the 20th **African** country to gain membership to **The Commonwealth of Nations**, describing the development as a "*major geopolitical turning point*" for Gabon.

Although Bongo's end-of-year speech exuded optimism, civil society leader and NGO **Brainforest** president **Marc Ona Essangui** said Bongo's speech is out of touch with Gabon's socio-economic realities.¹³ Essangui referred to the strikes in the education, banking and petroleum sectors as evidence of this.¹⁴

... with economic growth estimated at 3.3% from 2022-2024

Economy and recovery minister **Nicole Jeanine Roboty Mbou** says Gabon will record growth of 1.5% in its gross domestic product (GDP) in 2021, a three-point improvement from the 1.8% economic contraction experienced in 2020.¹⁵ Roboty Mbou delivered her projection at a meeting of the **Economic Community of Central African States (CEMAC)** steering committee on economic and financial reform programme in **Douala (Cameroon)** on 23 December.¹⁶ Roboty Mbou projects that Gabon will register 3.3% economic growth from 2022-2024, with inflation to be contained below the CEMAC threshold of 3%.¹⁷ Roboty Mbou pledged to pursue tax exemption reductions, increase non-oil revenue for the state, raise investment in social domains and infrastructure and improve debt management, to achieve this growth target.¹⁸

The **International Monetary Fund (IMF)**, in its first review of the Extended Credit Mechanism, which ended on 15 December, echoed Roboty Mbou's projection of 1.5% economic growth in 2021.¹⁹ IMF delegation head **Boileau Loko** attributed this growth to favourable oil prices and the government's sound management of the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁰ Nevertheless, Loko suggested the Gabonese state needs to strengthen revenue collection, and improve public finance management and debt sustainability.²¹ Gabon's **Direction Générale de l'Économie et de la Politique Fiscale (DGEPF)** (general directorate of economy and fiscal policy) reported at the end of September that

⁹ Direct Infos Gabon, 4 Jan 2022

¹⁰ Direct Infos Gabon, 4 Jan 2022

¹¹ Gabon Media Time, 31 Dec 2021

¹² Gabon Media Time, 31 Dec 2021

¹³ Gabon Media Time, 4 Jan 2022

¹⁴ Gabon Media Time, 4 Jan 2022

¹⁵ Gabon Review, 27 Dec 2021

¹⁶ Gabon Review, 27 Dec 2021

¹⁷ Gabon Review, 27 Dec 2021

¹⁸ Medias 241, 24 Dec 2021

¹⁹ Gabon Media Time, 15 Dec 2021

²⁰ Gabon Media Time, 15 Dec 2021

²¹ Gabon Media Time, 15 Dec 2021

Gabon's public debt stock stood at 6,689.3 billion FCFA (\$11.6 billion), a 15% y/y increase.²² This figure increased after Gabon raised 458 billion FCFA (\$787.3m) in a **Eurobond** issue from 17-18 November (see *ARC Briefing Gabon November 2021*).²³

Mobilising domestic revenue will be exceptionally challenging for Gabon. **United Kingdom**-based NGO **Tax Justice Network** released a report on 16 November entitled "*Tax Justice: State of Play 2021*" in which it estimates that 441 billion FCFA (\$770.9m) was transferred from Gabon to tax havens in 2020.²⁴

Government signs 20-year utility concession agreement

The Gabonese state signed a 20-year concession agreement on 5 January with the **Société d'Énergie et d'Eau du Gabon (SEEG)** for the production, transmission and distribution of electricity and drinking water in Gabon.²⁵ The agreement allows for independent producers to provide these utilities, effectively ending SEEG's monopoly.²⁶ Water and energy minister **Alain-Claude Bilie-By-Nze** said at the signing ceremony that the government had renewed SEEG's contract on the basis of the firm's expertise and the importance of maintaining continuity in such a strategic domain.²⁷

The Gabonese state currently has a 100% stake in SEEG, which was a joint venture between the state (49%) and **France**-based **Veolia** (51%) from 1997 to 2019. In February 2018, the government declared its intention to terminate Veolia's participation in SEEG amid complaints of poor service delivery and allegations that SEEG was responsible for environmental pollution (see *ARC Briefing Gabon March 2018*). The Gabonese state concluded its purchase of Veolia shares in February 2019.²⁸ In April 2021, the government appointed a task force to lead negotiations for the signing of a new contract.²⁹

Nze said the new agreement includes provisions for improving the quality of water and electricity services provided to consumers while maintaining affordable rates, including social tariffs reserved for low-income consumers.³⁰ The new contract also stipulates that the **Agence de Régulation du secteur de l'Eau potable et de l'Énergie Électrique (ARSEE)** (water, energy and electricity regulatory agency) can sanction SEEG in the event of service interruption.³¹ SEEG director general **Alain Patrick Kouma** suggests that the new contract will result in SEEG investing more, which will improve the company's service delivery capacity.³² President Bongo reportedly directed the liberalisation of utility service provision to allow independent producers to operate in the water and electricity sectors, to improve service delivery.³³

Constitutional Court suspends new Covid-19 measures

The **Cour Constitutionnelle** (constitutional court) has issued two decisions suspending the government's introduction of vaccine passports and proposed monetisation of **Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR)** testing to detect the presence of **SARS-Cov-2**, the virus that causes Covid-19. The court suspended a set of Covid-19-related measures on 24 December that were set to take effect on 15 December,³⁴ following a request for their withdrawal by civic action group **COPIL Citoyen**.³⁵ These included the requirement to present Covid-19 vaccination certificates or negative PCR tests to access

²² Gabon Media Time, 10 Jan 2022

²³ Direct Infos Gabon, 18 Nov 2021

²⁴ Gabon Media Time, 28 Dec 2021

²⁵ Le Nouveau Gabon, 5 Jan 2022

²⁶ Gabon Actu, 6 Jan 2022

²⁷ Gabon Review, 5 Jan 2022

²⁸ Gabon Review, 19 Feb 2021

²⁹ Gabon Review, 5 Jan 2022

³⁰ Gabon Review, 5 Jan 2022

³¹ Agence Ecofin, 11 Jan 2022

³² Gabon Review, 5 Jan 2022

³³ Gabon Media Time, 5 Jan 2022

³⁴ Le Nouveau Gabon, 24 Dec 2021

³⁵ RFI, 3 Jan 2022

public places in Gabon, including administrative buildings, businesses, restaurants and snack bars.³⁶ The government also set the price of PCR tests, previously administered free of charge, at 20,000 FCFA (\$34)-50,000 FCFA (\$87). COPIL Citoyen lodged a complaint at the constitutional court on 13 December against the introduction of these measures, which the government had announced on 27 October.³⁷ COPIL Citoyen organised a general boycott on 15 December opposing the new orders (see *ARC Briefing Gabon December 2021*).³⁸ The court suspended the government's measures on the grounds that state authorities had not followed due procedure by failing to inform the **Assemblée Nationale** (national assembly) and **Senate**.³⁹

The interior ministry issued another order on 24 December, implementing the same measures that the Constitutional Court had revoked.⁴⁰ COPIL Citoyen lodged a further appeal at the court on 28 December.⁴¹ The court suspended the interior ministry's directive on 31 December on the grounds that the government had violated the fundamental human rights of its citizens in implementing the new laws.⁴² The court ruled that attaching a cost to the administration of a PCR test was illegal, as the sale of tests was not included in the 2021 or 2022 finance bill.⁴³ The court added that, in the event PCR tests had to be paid for, the price must take into account Gabon's socio-economic realities.⁴⁴ The court annulled the government's directives and gave prime minister **Rose Christiane Ossouka Raponda** and her cabinet one month to rectify their decisions.⁴⁵

Defying the court again, the government issued a further decree on 3 January, stipulating that VIP PCR tests for passengers travelling to Gabon would cost 30,000 FCFA (\$52), while normal PCR tests would cost 10,000 FCFA (\$17). No reference was made to a vaccination mandate.⁴⁶

COPIL Citoyen pledged during a press conference on 3 January to keep holding the government to account with respect to its management of the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴⁷ The NGO issued a seven-day ultimatum for the government to publish the parliamentary report on the use of Covid-19 funds since the start of Covid-19.⁴⁸ In response, MPs voted on 10 January not to publish the report.⁴⁹ National assembly president **Faustin Boukoubi** justified the MPs' actions on the basis that several of the claims contained in the report were not backed by sufficient evidence.⁵⁰

COPIL Citoyen is not the only body calling for greater transparency with respect to the government's management of Covid-19.⁵¹ Gabon borrowed nearly 500 billion FCFA (\$872.4m) from several external lenders including the IMF, the **African Development Bank (AfDB)** and the **World Bank**, to finance its Covid-19 response plan.⁵² The IMF, in its first review of the Extended Credit Mechanism in December (see above), also called on government authorities to release the audit report on the use of Covid-19 funds.⁵³ The opposition **Union Nationale (UN)**, through its vice president **Odette Taty Koumba**, claims the government is using Covid-19 to undermine human rights and unduly enrich

³⁶ Gabon Review, 19 Dec 2021

³⁷ Gabon Review, 19 Dec 2021

³⁸ Gabon Review, 19 Dec 2021

³⁹ RFI, 25 Dec 2021

⁴⁰ RFI, 25 Dec 2021

⁴¹ Le Nouveau Gabon, 29 Dec 2021

⁴² Gabon Actu, 29 Dec 2021

⁴³ Le Nouveau Gabon, 3 Jan 2022

⁴⁴ Le Nouveau Gabon, 3 Jan 2022

⁴⁵ Le Nouveau Gabon, 3 Jan 2022

⁴⁶ RFI, 3 Jan 2022

⁴⁷ Le Nouveau Gabon, 3 Jan 2022

⁴⁸ Le Nouveau Gabon, 3 Jan 2022

⁴⁹ Gabon Review, 10 Jan 2022

⁵⁰ Direct Infos Gabon, 11 Jan 2022

⁵¹ ARC Gabon analyst

⁵² Direct Infos Gabon, 11 Jan 2022

⁵³ Direct Infos Gabon, 11 Jan 2022

itself. In response to the government's reluctance to release the parliamentary report, COPIL Citoyen called for a two-day general boycott from 13-14 January to demand publication of the report.⁵⁴

Despite the court's annulment of the government's recent directives, health authorities are likely to remain resolute in their aim to increase Covid-19 vaccine uptake.⁵⁵ Health minister **Dr. Guy Patrick Obiang** stated on 27 December that Gabon was officially experiencing a fourth wave of Covid-19 infections, noting that 1,040 cases had been registered from 24-26 December.⁵⁶ Obiang described the situation as "worrying" and claimed the majority of cases were among unvaccinated individuals.⁵⁷ Obiang called on the population to remain vigilant during the holiday period and respect the government's preventive measures.⁵⁸

Prime minister Ossouka Raponda informed Obiang on 4 January that Gabonese were encouraged to present themselves "soon" for a third dose of Covid-19 vaccine.⁵⁹ High-risk individuals and healthcare workers will be prioritised to receive booster shots.⁶⁰ President Bongo claimed in his year-end address that life in Gabon can only return to "normal" if vaccination rates increase significantly.⁶¹ As of 11 January, Gabon had registered 44,806 cases of Covid-19 in its population of 2.2 million, with 39,234 recoveries and 297 Covid-19-related deaths.⁶² A total of 277,616 Gabonese have been fully vaccinated against Covid-19.⁶³

Planner

2023 (**Gabon**) Local and national assembly elections

Chronology

13 Jan 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Agence Ecofin*. **Colas**, a subsidiary of **France**-based **Bouygues**, has reached an agreement with the Gabonese government to tar the 9.5km **PK5-PK12** road in Libreville to compensate for a previously completed project conducted by the firm, which was judged to be over-billed;

12 Jan 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Agence Ecofin*. **Australia**-based miner **Genmin Limited** announces the conclusion of a non-binding memorandum of understanding (MOU) with **China**-based **Jianlong Group**, a two-year contract that covers the annual sale of 2 million tonnes of lump and fine iron ore from the **Baniaka** project;

10 Jan 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. The **Direction Générale de la Dette (DGD)** (general debt directorate) reports that the Gabonese state borrowed 694 billion FCFA (\$1,210 billion) from domestic and external creditors during the first nine months of 2021;

10 Jan 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Le Nouveau Gabon*. **Comilog**, subsidiary of **France**-based metallurgical group **Eramet**, reports that it produced 7 million tonnes of manganese in 2021, a 17.14% y/y improvement from the 2020 figure of 5.8 million tonnes;

10 Jan 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. The **Société Gabonaise de Raffinage (Sogara)** (Gabonese refining company) reports that turnover increased in 2021 to 309.6 billion FCFA (\$540.3m) from 126.4 billion FCFA (\$220.6m) in 2020;

⁵⁴ Le Nouveau Gabon, 10 Jan 2022

⁵⁵ ARC Gabon analyst

⁵⁶ Le Nouveau Gabon, 28 Dec 2021

⁵⁷ Le Nouveau Gabon, 28 Dec 2021

⁵⁸ Le Nouveau Gabon, 28 Dec 2021

⁵⁹ Gabon Review, 4 Jan 2022

⁶⁰ Gabon Review, 4 Jan 2022

⁶¹ Gabon Media Time, 31 Dec 2021

⁶² Infocovid.ga, 13 Jan 2022

⁶³ Infocovid.ga, 13 Jan 2022

10 Jan 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. **Assemblée Nationale** (national assembly) members have refused to make public the investigative report related to the use of state-allocated **Covid-19** funds in 2020;

4 Jan 2022 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. Health minister **Dr. Guy Patrick Obiang Ndong** says the government has recommended the administration of a third dose of **Covid-19** vaccines to the population;

31 Dec 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. President **Ali Bongo Ondimba** confirms during his annual state of the nation address that Gabon will gain admission to **The Commonwealth of Nations** in 2022;

31 Dec 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. For the second time in a week, the **Cour Constitutionnelle** (constitutional court) reinstates a ruling declaring **Covid-19** containment measures implemented by the government, which entail the introduction of a vaccine passport, to be unconstitutional, and orders the government to suspend them, following parliamentary rejection of the constitutional court's earlier ruling on 24 December;

31 Dec 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *RFI*. Public prosecutor **André Patrick Roponnat** announces the arrest of four youth football coaches, accused of sexually abusing hundreds of children, following the release of an investigative report on the matter by **United Kingdom**-based publication **The Guardian**;

30 Dec 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Hum Angle*. The **Caisse National d'Assurance Maladie et de Garantie Sociale (CNAMGS)** (national medical insurance fund) refuses to pay for drugs prescribed to patients diagnosed with Covid-19 claiming it is the responsibility of the **Comité de pilotage du Plan de veille et de Riposte sur L'épidémie à Coronavirus (COPIL)** (technical commission for the fight against the coronavirus);

30 Dec 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Financial Afrik*. **Cameroon**-based **Africa Bright Securities (ABS)** secures the first green bonds issued in the **Communauté Economique et Monétaire de l'Afrique Centrale (CEMAC)** (central African economic and monetary community) zone, totaling 20 billion FCFA (\$33.9m) on behalf of Gabon-based urban development company **Façade Maritime du Champ Triomphal (FMCT)**; The subscription ran 15-23 December and will be repaid at an annual gross rate of 7.5% over a 5-year period;

30 Dec 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Actu*. The **African Development Bank (AfDB)** announces it will assist state-owned **Gabon Oil Company (GOC)** financially and technically to develop its gas activities with the aim of putting an end to gas flaring in Gabon by 2025;

29 Dec 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. Gabon is set to begin its mandate as a non-permanent member of the **United Nations Security Council (UNSC)** from 2022-2023;

28 Dec 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Le Nouveau Gabon*. Health minister **Dr. Guy Patrick Obiang Ndong** reports that Gabon is experiencing a fourth wave of **Covid-19** infections, with the **Comité de pilotage du Plan de veille et de Riposte sur L'épidémie à Coronavirus (COPIL)** (technical commission for the fight against the coronavirus) reporting 1,040 positive tests from 24-26 December;

27 Dec 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Le Nouveau Gabon*. Transport minister **Brice-Constant Paillat** authorises Gabonese nationals travelling from **South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique** and **Angola** to return to Gabon if they obtain special authorisation from Gabonese consular authorities with jurisdiction over those countries;

23 Dec 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. The ruling **Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG)** has banned its party members from creating political associations meant to praise President **Ali Bongo Ondimba**;

20 Dec 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Medias241*. Gabon is set to borrow 47 billion FCFA (\$82m) from the **Banque des Etats de l'Afrique Centrale (BEAC)** (Bank of Central African States) and the **African**

Development Bank (AfDB), which will be used to support the government's Covid-19 response efforts and economic reform;

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