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Imprisoned former presidential director of cabinet and minister Brice Laccruche Alihanga is served with additional charges, accusing him of fraudulently obtaining a birth certificate and certificate of nationality to acquire Gabonese citizenship. Gabonese authorities deepen talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in order to obtain financial support for the implementation of the Plan d'Accélération de la Transformation (PAT) (transformation acceleration plan), Gabon's economic development agenda for 2021-2023. Mines, petroleum, gas and hydrocarbons minister Vincent de Paul Massassa is optimistic about Gabon's hydrocarbons sector, despite a 9.8% year-on-year drop in petroleum sales in 2020. The Covid-19 vaccine rollout reaches all provinces as health minister Guy Patrick Ndong assures there will be enough vaccine doses for the entire population. New Covid-19 infection rates are declining.

Former presidential cabinet director Alihanga faces more legal trouble

Former presidential cabinet director and minister **Brice Laccruche Alihanga** is facing further criminal charges, making his return to the political fold in the short term increasingly unlikely. Alihanga has been in preventive detention at the **Prison Centrale de Libreville** since December 2019, following his arrest on several corruption-related allegations. The **Tribunal Correctionnel de Libreville** (Libreville criminal tribunal) prosecutor on 23 April informed Alihanga and his lawyer, **Anges Kevin Nzigou**, that he was serving them with new charges, based on accusations that Alihanga had fraudulently procured documents, including a birth certificate and certificate of nationality, in 2004 that enabled him to acquire Gabonese citizenship.^{1 2}

Acquiring Gabonese citizenship was of utmost importance to Alihanga, as it is a prerequisite to run for elected office in Gabon.³ Alihanga was born in 1980 in **Marseille (France)** to two French nationals.⁴ His father, **Norbert Fargeon**, was an expatriate who worked in Gabon. However, upon his parent's divorce, Alihanga adopted the surname of his stepfather, **Louis André Laccruche Alihanga**, an adviser to former President **Omar Bongo Ondimba** (1967-2009) and a prominent engineer from Bongo's home province of **Haut Ogooué**.⁵ According to state-run newspaper **l'Union**, there was no trace of Alihanga's documents at the **Centre de Documentation (CODEC)**, which processes birth certificates and certificates of nationality.⁶

The allegations that Alihanga used fraudulent documents to obtain Gabonese nationality are serious. A conviction could result in up to five years' imprisonment, according to Article 122 of the **Code Pénale** (Penal Code).⁷ In a press conference on 27 April, Nzigou denied the new allegations against his client, accusing the prosecution of not allowing the defence team to prepare its case and describing the situation as a "*parody of justice*".⁸ After the start of proceedings at the Libreville Criminal Tribunal on 29 April, Alihanga's defence team requested that the trial be postponed until 3 May.⁹ The defence

¹ Jeune Afrique, 4 May 2021

² RFI, 4 May 2021

³ Jeune Afrique, 4 May 2021

⁴ Jeune Afrique, 29 May 2020

⁵ Jeune Afrique, 29 May 2020

⁶ Direct Infos Gabon, 28 Apr 2021

⁷ Direct Infos Gabon, 28 Apr 2021

⁸ Direct Infos Gabon, 27 Apr 2021

⁹ Gabon Review, 4 May 2021

team then requested an adjournment of the trial, calling for the case to be referred to the **Cour d'Appel** (Appeal Court) on the basis that the preliminary investigation report exonerated their client from wrongdoing and the case was thus inadmissible before the criminal tribunal.¹⁰ Alihanga's defence team also claimed that the prosecution was refusing to allow witnesses to testify, particularly the magistrates who had provided Alihanga with the allegedly fraudulent documentation.¹¹ If the defence and the prosecution fail to reach common ground, the case could be taken to the **Cour de Cassation** (Court of Cassation).¹²

Until Alihanga's arrest in November 2019, local observers speculated that he might run for presidential office when President **Ali Bongo Ondimba's** (2009-present) current term comes to an end in 2023.¹³ As Bongo's former chief of cabinet, Alihanga wielded significant power, which he used to great effect during the course of 2019 when Bongo was recovering from the stroke he suffered in October 2018 (see *ARC Briefing Gabon January-October 2019*). Alihanga used his position as director of cabinet to consolidate power, purge rivals in government, and ensure the promotion of his associates. Alihanga orchestrated the removal of members of government such as former prime minister **Emmanuel Issoze Ngondet**, former defence minister **Etienne Massard**, former interior minister **Lambert Mbatha**, former environment minister **Guy Bertrand Mapangou**, former housing and urbanisation minister **Régis Immongault**, former petroleum and hydrocarbons minister **Pascal Ambourouet**, former infrastructure minister **Jean-Pierre Oyiba**, former agriculture minister **Ali Akbar Onanga** and former social protection minister **Ali Guy-Maixent Mamiaka**.¹⁴ Alihanga also engineered the appointment of his allies to cabinet positions including **Roger Owono Mba** (economy and finance), **Noel Mboumba** (mines, petroleum, hydrocarbons and gas) and **Tony Ondo Mba** (water and energy), **Justin Ndoudangoye** (public works) and **Ike Nguoni** (government spokesperson).

However, Bongo's return to the forefront of the political scene in October 2019 spelled the beginning of the end for Alihanga's political career and ambitions. A presidential decree on 7 November 2019 announced a minor cabinet shuffle, which saw Alihanga dismissed (see *ARC Briefing Gabon November 2019*). Alihanga was subsequently arrested under the directives of the government's anti-corruption campaign, **Operation Scorpion**, and charged with financial embezzlement, embezzlement of public funds and money laundering (see *ARC Briefing December 2019 and January 2020*). The individuals that Alihanga had appointed to government were also dismissed, arrested and imprisoned (see *ARC Briefing Gabon December 2019*).

Alihanga is yet to face trial on the charges leveled against him. In November, the **United Nations (UN) Working Group on Arbitrary Detention** called on the government to take appropriate measures to ensure the release of Alihanga and four other co-accused.¹⁵ The UN body also requested the government to launch an independent investigation into the circumstances surrounding Alihanga's arrest.¹⁶ The Gabonese government is yet to respond to this request.¹⁷

Government deepens discussions with IMF to support new development agenda

The government has confirmed its intention to receive support from the international financial community to support the implementation of its **Plan d'Accélération de la Transformation (PAT)** (transformation acceleration plan). The announcement came during a 30 April videoconference with a delegation from the **International Monetary Fund (IMF)**.¹⁸ The PAT is Gabon's short-term national economic agenda, which will run from 2021-2023 (see *ARC Briefing Gabon February-March 2021*). After adopting the plan in March, Gabon initiated discussions with the IMF to negotiate a financial

¹⁰ Gabon Review, 4 May 2021

¹¹ Gabon Review, 4 May 2021

¹² Gabon Review, 3 May 2021

¹³ ARC Gabon analyst

¹⁴ Jeune Afrique, 7 Nov 2019

¹⁵ Jeune Afrique, 15 Jan 2021

¹⁶ Jeune Afrique, 15 Jan 2021

¹⁷ Jeune Afrique, 15 Jan 2021

¹⁸ Direct Infos Gabon. 3 May 2021

assistance plan to fund the PAT.¹⁹ Prime minister **Rose Christiane Ossouka Raponda** and IMF resident representative **Marcos Poplawski Ribeiro** held preliminary discussions on 2 March.²⁰ Ribeiro expressed the IMF's satisfaction with the establishment of the PAT and stated the IMF's willingness to support its implementation (see *ARC Briefing Gabon March 2021*).²¹ Ossouka Raponda attended a further meeting with IMF officials on 29 April, together with economy and recovery minister **Nicole Janine Roboty Mbou** and budget minister **Sosthene Ossoungou Ndibangoye**.²²

If the IMF agrees to provide support to Gabon, it will not be the first time it does so. Gabon was placed under the IMF-administered **Extended Credit Mechanism (ECM)** in 2017, in terms of which Gabon received \$642m from 2017-2020 as part of an economic reform programme.²³ Gabon intends to raise 1,600 billion FCFA (\$2.9 billion) for priority projects earmarked in the PAT.²⁴

The PAT aims to stimulate Gabon's economic and social transformation by accelerating engines of growth and expanding access to social safety nets, in order to consolidate macroeconomic stability as well as sustainable and equitable economic growth. Presidential special adviser **Marc Tchango** says the PAT underscores President Bongo's aim to pursue Gabon's long-term transformation, especially in the wake of **Covid-19** and the global oil price shocks, which have negatively impacted the local economy. Tchango says the current situation requires greater efforts to promote Gabon's structural economic transformation and promote inclusive growth, job and wealth creating opportunities that will improve livelihoods and reduce inequality. Tchango also noted the need to consolidate public finances in order to strengthen external accounts. Investment in priority areas outlined in the PAT, such as agriculture, construction, digital and technology, hydrocarbons, health and timber sector, are expected to put Gabon on the path to success.

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)**, in its July 2020 report on the socio-economic impact of Covid-9 in Gabon, noted that by June 2020 Gabon had lost 104,000 jobs as a result of the combined effect of Covid-19, the oil price shocks and resultant economic recession.²⁵ Most jobs lost were in the domains of retail (30.4%), education (17.1%) and domestic work (10.5%), while the hotel and restaurant as well as the hydrocarbons sector also saw significant retrenchments.²⁶ The report also noted that 32% of Gabonese live in poverty.²⁷

Improving Gabon's investment and regulatory environment will be key in attaining the PAT's objectives. The **Haut Conseil pour l'Investissement (HCI)** (higher investment council) on 23 April presented 13 reforms that will be undertaken in line with the PAT, seven of which are already in place.²⁸ The **Agence Nationale pour la Promotion d'Investissement (ANPI)** (national investment promotion agency) intends to create a digital one-stop-shop to reduce the time to create a business to 48 hours and enable business permits to be received within 15 days.²⁹ The reforms also aim to introduce online tax payments, promote cross-border trade by reducing time for customs declarations, establish commercial courts to reduce the litigation timeframe and facilitate access to electricity within 30 days.³⁰ Investment promotion minister **Carmen Ndaot** claims consistent application of these reforms will make Gabon a top-100 global investment destination.³¹ The government also established an investment promotion task force on 16 April with the mandate of

¹⁹ Gabon Media Time, 4 Mar 2021

²⁰ Direct Infos Gabon, 4 Mar 2021

²¹ Gabon Media Time, 4 Mar 2021

²² Gabon Review, 2 May 2021

²³ Gabon Review, 2 May 2021

²⁴ Gabon Media Time, 4 Mar 2021

²⁵ Gabon Media Time, 25 Apr 2021

²⁶ Gabon Media Time, 25 Apr 2021

²⁷ Gabon Media Time, 25 Apr 2021

²⁸ Direct Infos Gabon, 26 Apr 2021

²⁹ Direct Infos Gabon, 26 Apr 2021

³⁰ Direct Infos Gabon, 26 Apr 2021

³¹ Direct Infos Gabon, 26 Apr 2021

formulating new investment policies and reorienting Gabon's current investment strategy to make it a more attractive investment destination for both domestic and foreign investors.³²

Optimism reigns in hydrocarbons sector despite fall in oil sales

Mines, petroleum, gas and hydrocarbons minister **Vincent de Paul Massassa** is optimistic about Gabon's hydrocarbons sector, despite a 9.8% year-on-year drop in petroleum sales in 2020. Petroleum exports make up 70.5% of Gabon's exports and contribute to 37.7% of its gross domestic product (GDP), making the petroleum industry one of Gabon's most strategic economic activities.³³ Petroleum sales generated 2,126.7 billion FCFA (\$3.9 billion) in revenue for Gabon in 2020.³⁴

Massassa noted during a question and answer session at the **Assemblée Nationale** (national assembly) on 28 April, that the government has signed 12 hydrocarbons contracts since the promulgation of the **Code des Hydrocarbures** (hydrocarbons code) on 16 July, while two contracts were amended to allow the companies to commence drilling of additional wells.³⁵ Under the previous legislation introduced in 2014, no contracts were signed, as hydrocarbons investors reportedly deemed the legislative framework too rigid and unattractive.³⁶ Massassa claimed that more industry players would have signed agreements if not for Covid-19, citing the postponement of the 12th tender issue for 35 oil and gas blocks due to the on-going health crisis.³⁷

Massassa's optimistic outlook on the hydrocarbons sector is supported by recent noteworthy investment declarations by foreign firms operating in Gabon. **United States**-based **Vaalco Energy** CEO **George Maxwell** announced on 28 April that the company would invest \$73-\$79m in drilling two production development wells and would carry out two appraisals later this year.³⁸ Vaalco, which currently exploits the **Etame** field, has also signed a non-binding letter of intention (LOI) with **Singapore**-based **Omni Offshore Terminals PTE Ltd** to provide the firm with a **Floating Storage and Offloading** (FSO) unit to replace its **Floating Production Storage and Offloading** (FPSO) vessel.³⁹ Earlier in April, **PC Gabon Upstream**, a subsidiary of **Malaysia**-based **Petronas**, awarded a \$24m contract to Singapore-based **Maersk Viking Drilling** to carry out drilling at the F13 block.⁴⁰

Gabon extends national vaccination plan to all provinces

Health minister **Guy Patrick Ndong** has provided assurances that there is sufficient stock of Covid-19 vaccines to vaccinate the entire country against Covid-19. Ndong noted during the launch of the vaccine campaign in **Ogooué-Lolo Province** on 17 May that Gabon had received 400,000 doses of the **China**-manufactured **Sinopharm** vaccine.⁴¹ The government purchased 200,000 of the 300,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine that arrived on 9 May, while the Chinese government donated 100,000 doses.⁴² Gabon is still awaiting the delivery of 15,000 doses of the **Russia**-manufactured **Sputnik V** vaccine.⁴³

Ndong called on the population as well as healthcare workers to have confidence in the vaccine and receive their injections, which the government is providing at no cost.⁴⁴ Ndong said all provinces would have received vaccines by 23 May.⁴⁵ The vaccine rollout began on 23 March in **Estuaire Province** and continued in April to **Ogooué-Maritime** and **Haut-Ogooué**. The six remaining

³² Gabon Media Time, 16 Apr 2021

³³ Direct Infos Gabon, 28 Apr 2021

³⁴ Direct Infos Gabon, 28 Apr 2021

³⁵ Direct Infos Gabon, 28 Apr 2021

³⁶ Direct Infos Gabon, 28 Apr 2021

³⁷ Direct Infos Gabon, 28 Apr 2021

³⁸ Energy Voice, 4 May 2021

³⁹ Energy Voice, 4 May 2021

⁴⁰ Energy Voice, 16 Apr 2021

⁴¹ Gabon Review, 18 May 2021

⁴² Direct Infos Gabon, 10 May 2021

⁴³ Direct Infos Gabon, 10 May 2021

⁴⁴ Gabon Review, 18 May 2021

⁴⁵ Gabon Review, 18 May 2021

provinces will see their campaigns launch throughout May.⁴⁶ The health ministry reported that 8,000 people had been vaccinated as of 10 May.

Gabon is experiencing a significant reduction in positive cases. By 10 May, the number of daily confirmed cases had reduced from an average of 170 to 70 cases over the course of two weeks. At the time of writing, Gabon had 24,039 confirmed Covid-19 cases, 20,759 recoveries and 147 deaths in its population of 2.1 million individuals.⁴⁷ Despite this positive development, the health ministry announced the extension of Gabon's health state of emergency on 26 April, for an additional 45 days.⁴⁸

Planner

30 Jun 2021 **(Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. Deadline for tender submissions for 12th round of petroleum licences, scheduled for April

Jul 2021 **Montpellier (France)** France-Afrique summit

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

Chronology

20 May 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Agence France-Presse*. **French** authorities charge banking group **BNP Paribas SA** over accusations it laundered money stemming from corruption and embezzlement in a case over alleged ill-gotten assets linked to late **Gabonese** president **Omar Bongo**;

17 May 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. The **Agence Nationale des Parcs Nationaux (ANPN)** (national parks agency) says the state loses an estimated 75 billion FCFA (\$139.9m) annually due to the illegal gold trade;

11 May 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. President **Ali Bongo Ondimba** meets with **Commonwealth** secretary general **Baroness Patricia Scotland in London (United Kingdom)**, regarding Gabon's application to join the Commonwealth, which will be decided at the **Commonwealth Summit at Kigali (Rwanda)** in June;

11 May 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. **Société Autoroutière du Gabon (SAG)** (Gabon road company) CEO **Salim Bejaoui** says the first 81 km of the 780 km **Transgabonaise** highway will be completed in July 2022, rather than in March 2022, due to the late arrival of construction equipment;

11 May 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. **Sweden**-based **Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)** says Gabon's military spending was 147 billion FCFA (\$273.1m) in 2020, a 31% increase compared to 2019;

10 May 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. Gabon receives 300,000 doses of the **China**-manufactured **Sinopharm Covid-19** vaccine, of which 200,000 were purchased and the remaining 100,000 a donation from the Chinese government;

7 May **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. Presidential spokesperson **Jessye Ella Ekogha** says the government is already using some of the estimated 400 billion FCFA (\$739.8m) in false debt that was retrieved following a state-sanctioned audit of domestic debt, to carry out development projects that had been suspended due to lack of funds;

2 May **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. Economy and recovery minister **Nicole Jeanine Lydie Roboty** holds meeting via videoconference with the **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** to solicit IMF support to finance Gabon's economic development agenda from 2021-2023, the **Plan d'Accélération de la Transformation (PAT)**;

⁴⁶ Gabon Review, 18 May 2021

⁴⁷ [Worldmeter, 20 May 2021](#)

⁴⁸ Gabon Review, 26 Apr 2021

29 Apr 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. Petroleum, mines and gas minister **Vincent de Paul Massassa** says since the promulgation in July 2019 of the new hydrocarbons code, Gabon has signed 12 new contracts and two amendments allowing the extension of deep and very deep offshore exploration, while no such agreements were signed during the five years the previous framework was applicable;

25 Apr 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Media Time*. At the end of 2020, Gabon's poverty rate stood at 32.4% according to the **United Nations (UN)**;

22 Apr 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. **Direction Générale l'Economie et de la Politique Fiscale (DGPEF)** (directorate-general for the economy and fiscal policy) reports turnover of 196.3 billion FCFA (\$361.2m) in 2020 for state utilities provider, **Société d'Energie et d'Eau du Gabon (SEEG)**;

22 Apr 2021 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. The **Direction Générale des Douanes et des Droits Indirects (DGDI)** (directorate-general of customs and indirect duties) reports Gabon imported 970.2 billion FCFA (\$1.7 billion) worth of merchandise in 2020 against 1.049.2 billion FCFA (\$1.9 billion) in 2019;

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