

## AFRICA RISK CONSULTING

### Gabon Monthly Briefing October 2023

#### Gabon Summary 23 October 2023

*Transitional president General Brice Oligui Nguéma (2023-present) on 9 September appoints Raymond Ndong Sima as prime minister. Sima in turn presents a list of 26 ministers to lead the transitional government. The ruling Comité pour la transition et la restauration des institutions (CTRI) embarks on an anti-corruption campaign, targeting former ministers and even deposed president Ali Bongo Ondimba's (2009-2023) family. The coup has seemingly not deterred investors, with the mines and oil and gas sector still set to continue growing in Gabon. These sectors are key economic drivers for Gabon.*

#### New government appointed

Transitional president General **Brice Oligui Nguéma** (2023-present) on 9 September appointed **Raymond Ndong Sima** as prime minister. Sima, in turn, presented a list of 26 ministers to lead the transitional government. Sima served as prime minister under ousted president **Ali Bongo Ondimba** (2009-2023) between 2012 and 2014 before running against Bongo in the 2016 and 2023 presidential elections. Nguéma on 11 September appointed **Joseph Owondault Berre** as vice-president for the transitional government. Berre is a not well known in **Gabon** and is not a politician; however, he is known for his work in the oil and energy field, having served as general director of **Société gabonaise d'Entreposage des Produits Pétroliers (SGEPP)** (Gabonese petroleum products storage company).<sup>1</sup>

Although this current government is not likely to serve the full transition, Nguéma has set the tone, focusing on a mix of military figures and former ministers who served under Bongo. Furthermore, no opposition figure was appointed to be a minister.<sup>2</sup> Opposition leader **Jean François Ntoutoume Emane** of the **Rassemblement des patriotes républicains (RPR)** criticised the ruling military junta **Comité pour la transition et la restauration des institutions (CTRI)** on 12 October in this regard, noting the strong presence of ruling **Parti démocratique gabonais (PDG)** members.<sup>3</sup> Emane invited the CTRI to be more inclusive in the context of the transition.

New government	
Prime minister	Raymond Ndong Sima
Reform of institutions	Murielle Minkoue
Foreign affairs	Regis Onanga Ndiaye
Justice	Paul-Marie Gondjout
Health and social affairs	Professor Adrien Mongoungou
National education responsible for civic training	Carmélia Ntoutoume Leclerque
Higher education, scientific research and technological innovation	Professor Hervé Ndoum Essingone

<sup>1</sup> Gabon Review, 12 Sep 2023

<sup>2</sup> AFP, 11 Sep 2023

<sup>3</sup> Gabon Review, 12 Oct 2023

Labour and unemployment	Solange Nguiakie
Public service and capacity building	Raphaël Ngazouze
Public works	Flavien Nzengui Nzoundou
Habitat and town planning	André Jacques Augand
Water and forests	Colonel Maurice Allogo
Oil minister	Marcel Abeke
Mines minister	Hervé Patrick Opiangah
Agriculture, livestock and fisheries	Jonathan Ignoumba
Transport minister	Captain Loïc Moudouma Dinga
Energy and hydraulic resources	Jeannot Kalima
Commerce minister	Patricia Djipano
Tourism and crafts	Pascal Ngowet Siffon
New information and communications	Lieutenant-Colonel Ulrich Manfoumbi
Public accounts	Charles Mba
Economy	Mays Mouissi
Minister delegate to the presidency in charge of national defence	Brigitte Onkanowa
Minister delegate to the presidency in charge of interior and security	Herman Immongault
Minister delegate to the health minister	Françoise Makaya

The ruling CTRI continued its government appointments on 11 September, appointing the opposition leader of the **Union Nationale (UN)** and co-founder of opposition coalition **Alternance 2023**, **Paulette Missambo**, to head up the senate.<sup>4</sup> **Jean-Francois Ndongou** was also appointed as president of the **Assemblée Nationale** (national assembly) on the same day. Ndongou held several ministerial positions under both Bongo and his father, **Omar Bongo Ondimba** (1967-2009). Members of the national assembly and senate (98 and 70 respectively) were appointed on 7 October, giving the PDG a strong presence once again.<sup>5</sup>

Sima confirmed on 27 September that there would be a national dialogue organised between April and June 2024 to discuss the duration of the transition. While the length of the transition will not be fully known until after this national dialogue, Sima has maintained that he does not wish the transition to last longer than two years.<sup>6</sup> The government will accept proposals from citizens and a secretariat will be established to help summarise this. The delay has shaken investors, as noted by an **Africa Risk Consulting Briefing (ARC Briefing)** source who represents a company that has substantive investment in Gabon:

*“The Gabon coup has really unsettled the investor community. It is very difficult to plan for growth and assess shareholder value in the context of military rule because of the uncertainty it brings.*

<sup>4</sup> Jeune Afrique, 11 Sep 2023

<sup>5</sup> Gabon Review, 8 Oct 2023

<sup>6</sup> Le Nouveau Gabon, 28 Sep 2023

*Now the new prime minister has said they will only announce a timetable for a return to civilian rule in April next year...the uncertainty continues.”<sup>7</sup>*

### ... and starts corruption clean up

Since assuming power, the CTRI has embarked on an anti-corruption campaign targeting former ministers and even deposed president Bongo’s family. Bongo’s son, **Noureddin Valentin Bongo**, who was imprisoned alongside several members of Bongo’s cabinet on 30 August, including former deputy chief of staff **Jesseye Ella Ekogha**, former special advisor and spokesperson for the president **Ismail Oceni** and former chief of staff of **Coordonnateur Général des Affaires Présidentielles (CGAP)** (general coordinator of presidential affairs), **Mohamed Aliou Saliou**, and placed under a committal order on 19 September. They are accused of high treason, embezzlement of public funds, international financial embezzlement, falsification of the president’s signature and corruption.<sup>8</sup>

On 28 September, Bongo’s wife **Sylvia Bongo**, was indicted on charges of money laundering, forgery and falsification of records and placed under house arrest.<sup>9</sup> Her lawyer confirmed on 12 October that she had subsequently been jailed on charges of embezzlement.<sup>10</sup> The CTRI alleges that Sylvia Bongo and her son, Noureddin, have manipulated Bongo since he suffered from a stroke in 2018 and have effectively been running the country since, often signing documents on behalf of Bongo.<sup>11</sup> Despite the family facing charges, justice minister **Paul-Marie Gondjout** said on 3 October there are currently no court cases against Bongo himself.<sup>12</sup> Gondjout also confirmed that his ministry’s corruption investigations will go back as far as 15 years to recover funds.

Former ministers targeted notably include former water and forests minister **Lee White**. He appeared in court on 4 October of complicity in illegal logging and embezzlement and left on house arrest.<sup>13</sup> The **Syndicat national des professionnels des eaux et forêts (Synapef)** (national union of water and forestry professionals) said that it had initially lodged a case with police last May but that there was no response. On 7 October, White left for the **United Kingdom** for health reasons; however, he will have to return to Gabon once he has received treatment or the foreign affairs ministry has said it will issue an international arrest warrant for him.<sup>14</sup>

Former oil minister **Vincent de Paul Massassa** and former public works minister **Leon Armel Bounda Balonzi** also appeared in court on 22 September on charges of corruption and embezzlement. Both were subsequently sent to **Libreville** central prison, awaiting further court appearances.<sup>15</sup> The former **directeur général des Impôts (DGI)** (director general of taxes) **Gabin Otha Ndoumba** was also placed under arrest and sent to prison on 19 October on charges of embezzlement of public funds.<sup>16</sup> Local media are reporting that Ndoumba embezzled 500m FCFA (\$808,631).

In a further crackdown, the CTRI on 28 September abolished the **Autorité nationale de vérification et d’audit (Anavea)** (national verification and audit authority) and created the **Contrôle général d’État** (general state control), stating that a new independent administrative authority was needed to control, audit, evaluate and advise on the services of the state and local authorities.<sup>17</sup> Anavea was established in 2020 as an anti-corruption body; however, the CTRI claims it was ineffective. An ARC

<sup>7</sup> ARC Source, investor, 2 Oct 2023

<sup>8</sup> Le Nouveau Gabon, 20 Sep 2023

<sup>9</sup> Le Nouveau Gabon, 29 Sep 2023

<sup>10</sup> France24, 12 Oct 2023

<sup>11</sup> France24, 12 Oct 2023

<sup>12</sup> Direct Infos Gabon, 3 Oct 2023

<sup>13</sup> Direct Infos Gabon, 4 Oct 2023

<sup>14</sup> Direct Infos Gabon, 7 Oct 2023

<sup>15</sup> L’Union, 22 Sep 2023

<sup>16</sup> Direct Infos Gabon, 20 Oct 2023

<sup>17</sup> Le Nouveau Gabon, 29 Sep 2023

Briefing source with substantive investment in Gabon and **West Africa** welcomed the corruption crackdown and noted that it is comforting for investors:

*“Gabon had lost its level playing field for business. After the last election within the business community, we noted a high level of lawlessness. The period between 2013-2018 and the period after 2019 were like chalk and cheese, they were so different. The liberties people took were extreme.”<sup>18</sup>*

### Extractive sectors continue to develop despite coup

The ongoing coup has seemingly not deterred investors, with the mines and oil and gas sector set to continue growing in Gabon. Mines minister **Hervé-Patrick Opiangah** confirmed on 20 September that the transitional government would lift the September 2018 suspension on gold panning, research and gold production activities. The suspension was originally put in place on a “temporary” basis to help stop the development of illicit gold mining sites.<sup>19</sup> Gabon still mines and exports gold quite successfully, with raw gold exports increasing from 1.6 billion FCFA (\$2.58m) in 2020 to 8.4 billion FCFA (\$13.58m) in 2021. Opiangah said the decision is intended to help regularise the artisanal sector and help local communities who were previously reliant on these activities to make an income.<sup>20</sup> By lifting the suspension, these activities will now fall under the supervision of the mines ministry.

Despite the coup, production in the manganese sector is also expected to reach record levels this year. **China**-headquartered **Hangzhou Industrial Mining Company** noted on 25 September that production at its mine will reach 1.2 million tonnes this year before increasing to between 1.5 million tonnes and two million tonnes.<sup>21</sup> **Ogooué**, a subsidiary of **French** miner **Eramet**, also note that production will reach 7.5 million tonnes this year, stating that logistical disruptions led to a cessation of activities between 24 December 2022 and 18 January 2023, and only 24 hours were lost to the coup.<sup>22</sup>

On the oil front, interest also continues in Gabon. **United Kingdom**-headquartered **Tullow Oil** announced during a working visit to oil minister **Marcel Abéké** on 22 September that it will acquire new oil blocks in Gabon over the next three years and plans to invest 600 billion FCFA (\$969.2m) in the sector by 2026.<sup>23</sup> Tullow Oil CEO **Rahul Dhir** also previously told the media that the military coup in Gabon has not impacted its commercial activities and that operations are continuing as usual. **Anglo-British** oil group **Perenco** affirmed on 25 September during a working visit with Abéké that it will continue the construction of its liquefied natural gas production plant in **Cap Lopez** and that the transition will not modify any of its investments. The plant will cost Perenco \$5 billion. Since 2015, Perenco has invested \$3 billion in Gabon.<sup>24</sup>

During the 13<sup>th</sup> **Africa Oil Week** held in **Cape Town (South Africa)** between 10 and 13 October, **United States**-headquartered **Apache Corporation** and **Murphy Oil** also expressed interest in investing in Gabon, both in oil and gas.

The extractive industries are economic growth drivers for Gabon and the continued interest in the country despite political instability is a good signal that those involved in the country and potential investors remain confident in Gabon. The junta has also thus far kept a ‘hands-off’ approach to the oil and gas and mining industries, aware that they are key to keeping the economy alive.

<sup>18</sup> ARC Source, investor, 2 Oct 2023

<sup>19</sup> Le Nouveau Gabon, 20 Sep 2023

<sup>20</sup> Gabon Media Time, 20 Sep 2023

<sup>21</sup> Le Nouveau Gabon, 28 Sep 2023

<sup>22</sup> Le Nouveau Gabon, 25 Sep 2023

<sup>23</sup> Le Nouveau Gabon, 24 Sep 2023

<sup>24</sup> Direct Infos Gabon, 26 Sep 2023

## Chronology

- 19 Oct 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. Transitional president General **Brice Oligui Nguema** says that he will not accept the presidential salary offered to him and will remain on his salary as a commander of the republican guard;
- 18 Oct 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. Transitional president General **Brice Oligui Nguema** instructs the foreign minister to establish an embassy in **Rwanda** as soon as possible following a meeting with Rwandan president **Paul Kagame**;
- 12 Oct 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. Junta leader General **Brice Oligui Nguema** meets with **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)** president **Felix Tshisekedi** to discuss issues including peace, security and climate;
- 10 Oct 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. **Agence nationale de l'aviation civile (Anac)** (national civil aviation authority) suspends **African United Airlines**, a newly formed Gabonese airline, after only 28 days of activity;
- 5 Oct 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. Gabon cancels its visa exemption policy for member countries of the **European Union (EU)** without giving reasons;
- 1 Oct 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. Residents near **France**-headquartered **Maurel & Prom's Lake Ezanga** project block access to it and demand better living conditions through the construction of community infrastructure and jobs for residents;
- 27 Sep 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. **United States** announces it will halt aid to Gabon while it evaluates the effects of the 30 August coup;
- 26 Sep 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Le Nouveau Gabon*. **Russia's** lower house of parliament announces it has created new parliamentary groups with several **African** countries including Gabon;
- 25 Sep 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. **France**-headquartered **Eramet** says that despite logistical disruptions, it plans to produce 7.5 million tonnes of manganese from its Gabonese mine;
- 25 Sep 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Le Nouveau Gabon*. **United Kingdom**-headquartered **Tullow Oil** says it will acquire new oil blocks in Gabon over the next three years and plans to invest 600 billion FCFA (\$969.2m) in the sector by 2026;
- 22 Sep 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Le Nouveau Gabon*. Transition president **Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguéma** receives **Chad's** finance minister, **Taher Hamid Ngulin**, for an official visit in which Ngulin expresses solidarity and the support of Chad's president, General **Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno**, for the transitional government of Gabon;
- 22 Sep 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Le Nouveau Gabon*. Oil minister **Marcel Abéké** hears a petition from trade union organisation **Gabonese Petroleum Union (Upega)** for the relaunch of petroleum exploration activities in Gabon;
- 21 Sep 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Le Nouveau Gabon*. The junta announces that the suspension on gold panning, research and production activities implemented in 2018 has been lifted;
- 21 Sep 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. **Commonwealth** partially suspends Gabon from the organisation pending the restoration of democracy, giving the country two years to restore constitutional rule;
- 20 Sep 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. Transition president **Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguéma** confirms that former president **Ali Bongo Ondimba** will benefit from all privileges and rights due to a former head of state, which means he will have immunity from criminal proceedings;
- 18 Sep 2023 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. Transitional president **Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema** meets with his **Equatorial Guinean** counterpart, **Teodoro Obiang Nguema**, in his first visit abroad;

13 Sep 2023 **Libreville (Gabon) Sika Finance**. **United States**-headquartered **Moody's** maintains Gabon's Caa1 rating but revises its outlook from stable to negative, citing increased political uncertainty following the coup d'état;

### About Africa Risk Consulting:

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