

Freedom in the World 2022 - Republic of the Congo

Not Free

17

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 2 / 40

[Civil Liberties](#) 15 / 60

Last Year's Score & Status

20 / 100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

President Denis Sassou Nguesso has maintained nearly uninterrupted power for over 40 years by severely repressing the opposition. Corruption and decades of political instability have contributed to poor economic performance and high levels of poverty. Abuses by security forces are frequently reported and rarely investigated. While a variety of media operate, independent coverage is limited by widespread self-censorship and the influence of owners. Human rights- and governance-related nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) scrutinize state abuses, but also self-censor to avoid reprisals. Religious figures are also known to self-censor.

Key Developments in 2021

- In March, President Sassou Nguesso won a fourth presidential term since returning to power in 1997. Sassou Nguesso received 88.4 percent of the vote in a contest marred by a boycott from an opposition group, voter intimidation, and an internet shutdown.
- In February, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) revealed that the government had imported several caches of weapons from Azerbaijan between 2015 and 2020, with financial and logistical support from Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Some of the weapons were reportedly used during the government's 2016–17 military campaign in the Pool Region.
- In June, the government forced the Congolese Observatory for Human Rights (OCDH), the country's most active human rights NGO, to dismiss executive director Trésor Nzila Kendet. His dismissal followed a series of OCDH reports that were critical of the government's human rights record.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through 0 / free and fair elections? 4

The president is directly elected to five-year terms. The 2002 constitution restricted the president to two terms and set an age limit of 70. However, a 2015 constitutional referendum proposed by President Denis Sassou Nguesso removed those restrictions, allowing him to run again. The referendum passed amid widespread protests and claims of fraud.

Sassou Nguesso has held power since 1979, with the exception of a five-year period in the 1990s. In March 2021, he secured a fourth presidential term since returning to power in 1997, winning 88.4 percent of the vote. The election was marked by a boycott from the opposition Pan-African Union for Social Democracy, intimidation, and an internet shutdown. Guy Brice Parfait Kolélas, who died of COVID-19 soon after the election, won 8 percent.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

Congo’s parliament consists of a 72-seat Senate and a 151-seat National Assembly. Councilors from every department elect senators to six-year terms. National Assembly members are directly elected to five-year terms.

The July 2017 legislative elections were boycotted by several opposition parties amid credible allegations that the vote would be rigged. Sassou Nguesso’s Congolese Labor Party (PCT) claimed 96 lower-house seats and its allies won 12 in a process tainted by widespread fraud and low voter turnout. Elections were indefinitely postponed in nine districts in the Pool Region, where the military had been engaged in a campaign against a rebel group accused of launching attacks on Brazzaville.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 0 / 4

The 2015 constitutional referendum to increase presidential term limits consolidated the PCT’s dominance of the political system by allowing Sassou Nguesso to run for a third term. Elections are administered by the Independent National Electoral Commission, which was established in 2016 and is widely regarded as an instrument of presidential authority.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 1 / 4

Political groupings exist, but the government represses those not aligned with the PCT, including by persecuting their leaders. In 2016, opposition leader Paulin Makaya of the United for Congo party was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment for inciting disorder over his participation in protests against the constitutional referendum. Makaya was released in 2018 but was blocked from boarding international flights on at least two subsequent occasions. Four members of Embody Hope were arrested in 2019 for endangering state security but were released pending trial in 2020.

Sassou Nguesso’s two most prominent opponents in the 2016 presidential election received prison terms after that contest. In 2018, retired general Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko was sentenced to 20 years’ imprisonment for threatening state security. In 2019, André Okombi Salissa, who had led the opposition Initiative for Democracy in Congo coalition, was sentenced to 20 years of forced labor for the same charge.

The government banned private campaign contributions in 2016, leaving opposition parties and candidates dependent on limited public financing.

Political parties are sometimes denied registration without cause. During the 2017 legislative campaign, the Yuki party was denied official party status, forcing its candidates to run independently.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 0 / 4

There is little opportunity for the opposition to gain power through elections, and opposition leaders frequently experience harassment, intimidation, and arrest. During the 2016 presidential race, opposition candidates Mokoko and Okombi Salissa were repeatedly harassed during the election campaign and were subsequently imprisoned. During the 2021 electoral period, Kolélas complained of movement restrictions, while authorities cancelled some campaign events.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people’s political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 0 / 4

The Sassou Nguesso government routinely uses military and police forces to intimidate citizens. Employers engage in widespread discrimination in hiring and regarding other decisions, based on political beliefs.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 1 / 4

Although there are no legal restrictions on political participation by religion, gender, sexual identity, or ethnic group, members of Sassou Nguesso's northern Mbochi ethnic group occupy key government posts. Insofar as the government includes representatives from other regional and ethnic groups, their ability to shape policy is very limited. The government also routinely suppresses political parties that draw support from Congo's southern regions, which have long opposed Sassou Nguesso.

Women are underrepresented in government, holding just 17 National Assembly seats and 13 Senate seats. Societal constraints limit women's political participation in practice.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives 0 / 4 determine the policies of the government?

Government policy is set by President Sassou Nguesso, who won reelection in a deeply flawed process in March 2021. There is little oversight from the parliament, which is dominated by the ruling PCT and protects the executive from accountability.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 0 / 4

Corruption is endemic, and domestic prosecutions for corruption are often politically motivated. The president's family and advisers effectively control the state-run National Petroleum Company of Congo (SNPC) without meaningful oversight, and offshore companies are allegedly used to embezzle SNPC funds.

Sassou Nguesso's family has long been dogged by credible allegations of corruption by foreign governments, NGOs, and journalists, prompting demands for accountability from civil society. Denis Christel Sassou Nguesso, the president's son, reportedly faced a money-laundering indictment in France in 2019. In 2020, US prosecutors accused Denis Christel of using SNPC funds to acquire an apartment in Miami.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 0 / 4

Government operations are opaque. Although the constitution guarantees access to information, there is no implementing legislation, nor is there a specific law mandating public access to official information. Public procurement procedures are nontransparent. Authorities generally do not publish draft legislation or regulations.

In 2020, Global Witness reported that the SNPC held as much as \$3.3 billion in undisclosed liabilities, some of which resulted from activities unrelated to oil production, while dividends owed to the government had gone missing.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 1 / 4

While the constitution provides for freedom of speech and press, the government routinely pressures, threatens, and incarcerates journalists. While there are numerous media outlets, many are owned by government allies who influence their coverage. Widespread self-censorship among journalists discourages independent reporting in practice.

In February 2021, authorities arrested the editor of the satirical *Sel-Piment* newspaper, Raymond Malonga; a relative of President Sassou Nguesso had accused the publication of defamation. In December, *Sel-Piment* director Augias Ray Malonga was arrested in Brazzaville.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public 3 / 4 and private?

Although religious freedom is generally respected, pastors are reticent to make statements that could be construed as hostile to the government. In 2015, the government banned the wearing of the niqab, the full face veil, in public, citing security and terrorism concerns.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political 1 / 4 indoctrination?

Academic freedom is tenuous. Most university professors avoid discussions of or research on politically sensitive topics. In 2018, the government announced that it would ban a book, published in Paris, about widespread human rights abuses perpetrated by the military in the Pool Region between 2016 and 2017.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 1 / 4

The government surveils electronic communications of private individuals and maintains an extensive surveillance apparatus, which includes secret police and local informants. Surveillance is reportedly prevalent in public spaces in Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire. Citizens who speak out against the government are often arrested.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because rising surveillance has increased the threat of retaliation for public discussion of sensitive topics.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

The government restricts freedom of assembly. Groups must receive official authorization from local and federal authorities to hold public assemblies, and permission is routinely denied. Government forces sometimes employ violence against protesters or disperse assemblies. In early 2021, the government restricted the size of gatherings nationwide and maintained a nighttime curfew in Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire, using COVID-19 as its justification. Assembly restrictions remained in place as of December 2021.

The government placed a range of restrictions on political gatherings prior to the March 2021 elections. In some cases, officials used COVID-19 measures to justify their actions.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because the government maintained a nighttime curfew in some parts of the country, restricted the size of public assemblies, and restricted political gatherings during the electoral period.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 0 / 4

Although the constitution guarantees freedom of association, NGOs must register with the Interior Ministry. Those critical of the government often encounter a more burdensome registration process. Arbitrary arrests of civil society figures have continued in recent years, contributing to a reduction in activity. Groups still operating commonly curtail reporting on human rights abuses, or word criticism of authorities carefully, in order to avoid reprisals or harassment.

In March 2021, police arrested Alexandre Ibacka Dzabana, a prominent human rights activist, near his home. In June, the government forced the OCDH to dismiss Trésor Nzila Kendet, its executive director. Nzila's dismissal followed a series of reports that were critical of the government's human rights record.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because authorities have increasingly persecuted activists and retaliated against critical NGOs.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 2 / 4

Although union rights are nominally protected, laws protecting union members are not always enforced. The government has intervened in labor disputes by harassing and arresting laborers and pressuring union leaders, particularly against the country's largest labor union, the Congolese Trade Union Confederation.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

Congo's judiciary is dominated by Sassou Nguesso's allies, crippled by lack of resources, and vulnerable to corruption and political influence. In 2015, the Constitutional Court's confirmation of the constitutional referendum results was viewed as a rubber-stamp approval of Sassou Nguesso's efforts to remain in power. In April 2021, the Constitutional Court rejected legitimate objections to the conduct of the March elections.

F2 0-4 pts**Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4**

Defendants, including the government's political opponents, are routinely denied due process. Arbitrary arrests and detentions are common, despite being prohibited by the constitution. Other fair-trial rights guaranteed by law, including the right to legal assistance for those who cannot afford it, are not always honored in practice.

F3 0-4 pts**Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4**

Citizens in some neighborhoods are at risk of intimidation and violent crime by groups of young men known as *bébés noirs*. There have also been reports of arbitrary arrests and physical abuses by police attempting to curb the activities of such groups. Reports of human rights violations by security forces are generally not investigated by the government. Security forces physically attacked people while enforcing COVID-19 measures in 2020.

F4 0-4 pts**Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 0 / 4**

Employment discrimination against women persists. The government prevents refugees and other foreign workers from holding certain jobs, and refugees sometimes face harassment and arrest by authorities.

While no law specifically prohibits same-sex sexual relations between adults, LGBT+ people experience occasional police harassment.

Minority ethnic groups experience severe discrimination in employment, housing, and education. Some communities often live in substandard housing on the outskirts of villages, and occasionally are targeted in acts of violence committed by members of the majority Bantu population.

The government exhibits widespread discrimination against residents of Congo's southern regions. They are routinely denied high-paying public-sector jobs, as well as admission to the public university. By contrast, residents of Congo's northern regions are disproportionately appointed to key government positions and the civil service.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts**Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 2 / 4**

Although private citizens generally enjoy freedom of movement, activists and opposition leaders can face restrictions and confiscation of their passports.

An estimated 81,000 people left their homes in Pool Region during the 2016–17 conflict there.

The government imposed curfews, border closures, and internal travel restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. While curfews expired in much of Congo that year, nighttime curfews in Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire remained in effect as of December 2021. Land and river crossings were also closed as of December.

G2 0-4 pts**Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 2 / 4**

Legal protections for business and property rights can be undermined by bureaucracy, poor judicial safeguards, and corruption. The government directly or indirectly controls property in key industries such as oil, minerals, and aviation.

G3 0-4 pts**Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 1 / 4**

Violence against women, including domestic violence and rape, is widespread but rarely reported. There are no specific laws forbidding domestic violence other than general assault statutes.

Men are legally considered the head of the household, and divorce settlements are thus skewed against women. Adultery is illegal for both men and women, but women convicted of the crime face a potential prison sentence, while the penalty for men is a fine.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

Congo is a source and destination country for human trafficking, and allegations of complicity have been lodged against government officials. However, the US State Department reported in its *Trafficking in Persons Report 2021* that authorities continued to strengthen their antitrafficking efforts by providing more assistance to victims and prosecuting more alleged traffickers. In its 2021 report, the State Department noted that Congolese authorities won their first conviction since 2017.

According to local NGOs, members of minority groups have been conscripted into forced farm labor by members of the Bantu ethnic majority. Child labor laws are reportedly not effectively enforced.

ecoi.net summary: 
Annual report on political
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