



Freedom in the World 2014 - Gabon

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2014 Scores

Status: Not Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 5.5

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 5

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 6

OVERVIEW

Local and regional elections took place on December 14, with the president's dominant Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG) retaining an overwhelming majority of seats. Biometric identification was used for the first time, and election observers say more than 50 percent of eligible voters went to the polls, up sharply from the last municipal elections in 2008.

The discovery in March of a young girl's mutilated body on a beach in Libreville reignited public anger about ritual killings, and in May first lady Sylvia Bongo Ondimba led a march of several thousand people against the practice. The government banned a concurrent demonstration organized by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with close ties to the opposition who said the government was not doing enough to prevent the practice. Several leaders of the banned march were arrested. In June, a senator was arrested and accused of ordering the ritual murder of a 12-year-old girl.

Gabon's president, Ali Bongo Ondimba, has spent a great deal of effort trying to prove that he is different than his father, whom he succeeded after four decades in office, reducing the size of the presidential cabinet and eliminating ghost workers from the public payroll. But the government is still mired in corruption, and the country's oil revenue wealth still ends up disproportionately benefiting a wealthy elite. Despite ambitious growth plans and one of the highest per capita incomes in sub-Saharan Africa, Gabon's human development indicators remain well below average for a middle-income country. Public impatience is growing at the country's poor infrastructure – especially outside of Libreville – water shortages, and frequent power cuts.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 9 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 2 / 12

The 120 members of the National Assembly are elected by popular vote for five-year terms, while members of the 91-seat Senate are indirectly elected by regional and municipal officials for six-year terms. Presidential term limits were abolished in 2003, and the president, who is elected by popular vote for seven years, can dissolve the National Assembly. President Omar Bongo died in June 2009 after 41 years in power. In snap presidential elections the following August, his son Ali was elected with 42 percent of the vote against several senior PDG figures, who ran as independents. Although the opposition challenged the official results amid violent protests, the Constitutional Court upheld Bongo's victory following a recount the next month.

National Assembly elections in 2011 were boycotted by some opposition parties over the government's failure to implement biometric technology for voter registration, and the ruling PDG won all but seven seats. Five of the remaining seven seats went to parties allied with the PDG, while opposition parties Union for the New Republic (UPNR) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD) took one seat each. Small parties hold the remaining seats.

Regional and municipal elections were held on December 14, and the results were a predictable landslide for the ruling PDG, which claimed 1,517 of the 2,404 council seats nationwide. Although the PDG was the only party to have a candidate in each of the country's 122 constituencies, it failed to win a majority everywhere, including the northern Fang stronghold of Oyem and in the economic capital Port-Gentil, where it won 36 out of the 73 councilor seats. For the first time, voters used biometric registration.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 4 / 16

The government is dominated by the PDG, which has held power since it was formed in 1968. Political opposition is fragmented and weak, and many opposition parties are effectively under the umbrella of the ruling PDG. The principal opposition party, the National Union, was dissolved in January 2011 after it claimed victory in the 2009 presidential election and established a parallel government. Though banned, the party maintains its headquarters, but it is not allowed to organize public meetings. It has been in disarray since the death of its president in October 2011.

Some 20 opposition parties formed a loose coalition, the Union of Forces of Change (UFC) in September, 2012, but within months that group splintered amid accusations that some of the opposition parties were too conciliatory. A new group of about a dozen parties, the Union of Forces for an Alternative (UFA), was formed. Several leading opposition figures at one time were part of the government of Omar Bongo and are believed to have personally profited from his rule.

C. Functioning of Government: 3 / 12

President Bongo has taken several measures to lessen corruption, including contracting the American construction giant Bechtel to run the National Infrastructure Agency in an effort to lessen the possibility of kickbacks and bribes from domestic ministries. In September, the government announced that a corruption investigation had uncovered some 3,000 fake civil servants out of the 70,000-person civil service.

While the country's anticorruption commissioner says he has scores of open cases, the requisite special tribunal to try anticorruption cases has not been established. Graft is widespread.

Investigations in other countries, especially France and the United States, have revealed extensive patronage under Omar Bongo's regime.

In February, after five years of trying to obtain approval, Gabon was delisted as a candidate from the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) because it failed to submit a validation report. It is no longer recognized as an EITI implementing country. Gabon was ranked 106 out of 177 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 25 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 10 / 16

Press freedom is guaranteed by law. The only two daily newspapers are both government owned, although there are some two dozen private weeklies and monthlies and half a dozen private radio and television stations. While criticism of the government is usually permitted, most journalists practice self-censorship, and the National Communications Council (NCC), the government's main regulatory body, rarely permits criticism of the president.

In May, the NCC suspended two newspapers for six months each for lack of respect: the private weekly *Ezombolo* because of an April 22 column that criticized Bongo's record in office, and the satirical supplement *Le Gri-Gri de la Griffé* for indecency. It also suspended newspaper *La Calotte* for two months after it published articles critical of a minister and a deputy minister.

In March, environmental activist Marc Ona Essangui was sentenced to a six-month suspended sentence for defamation. During a November 2012 television debate, Ona accused Bongo's chief of staff, Liban Souleymane, of having a controlling interest in Olam Gabon, a joint-venture between a Singaporean agricultural company and Gabon that is believed to be worth more than \$200 million. Olam has been accused of land grabbing and environmental damage in Gabon. The contract is not public. Internet access is not restricted by the government.

Religious freedom is enshrined in the constitution and largely upheld by the authorities. The government does not directly restrict academic freedom.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 4 / 12

The rights of assembly and association are legally guaranteed, and NGOs are an important counterweight to the lack of an effective opposition. Generally, NGOs are free to investigate and report on civil liberties abuses. But their numbers are small. In addition, public protests must be approved by the government and harsh tactics have been used by security forces to keep order. There are several Facebook forums in which opposition to the government by Gabonese inside the country is expressed.

Unions are relatively strong, and the private industrial sector is almost entirely unionized. However, union members are occasionally blacklisted and there have been threats to workers who have supported labor unions. The country's powerful oil union, the National Organization of Oil Employees (ONEP), staged a one-week strike in March to protest the country's high numbers of undocumented oil workers.

F. Rule of Law: 6 / 16

The judiciary is not independent, and is subject to political influences. Prison conditions are harsh and there is severe overcrowding in the country's nine prisons. Pre-trial detention is often lengthy.

Legal prohibitions against arbitrary arrest and detention are not always observed. In October, a student at Omar Bongo University who was a leader in campus protest movements, Firmin Olo Obiang, was arrested by the General Directorate of Investigations (DGR), the country's internal security force, and held for just under a week. An anonymous complaint accused him of disrupting public order.

The country's large population of African immigrants is subject to harassment and extortion, especially during roundups by security forces. Most of Gabon's several thousand members of the indigenous Baka ethnic group live in extreme poverty in remote forest communities and are often exploited as cheap labor.

Bias against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons remained an issue, and most members of the LGBT community chose to keep their identities a secret to avoid housing and employment discrimination. But there were no reports of violence directed at any LGBT members.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 5 / 16

International attention in 2013 focused on an upsurge in ritual killings, which often peak before elections because certain body parts, including genitals, are believed to enhance strength. Senator Gabriel Eyeghe Ekomie was stripped of his parliamentary immunity in December 2012 after a man convicted of killing a young girl told the court he had done so on the senator's orders. Eyeghe Ekomie was arrested in June after failing to appear in court, the first time a senior politician in Gabon has been detained in such a case.

Gabon's relatively stable economy makes it far easier than elsewhere for traffickers to lure young women under 18 to the country. Teenagers from Mali, Benin, and Togo are trafficked into Gabon and forced to do manual labor, while girls are sent to households or brothels without their consent and made to work without pay. The Walk Free Foundation describes this as "modern slavery"; in its 2013 Global Slavery Index it ranked Gabon tenth in the world in the prevalence of slavery, with an estimated 13,000 to 14,000 people enslaved. There are a relatively large number of women in senior government and private sector positions. However, there is no law against sexual harassment, rape is rarely prosecuted, and there is no specific mention of spousal rape in the law.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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