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Repression of critical voices continued, with violations of the right to freedom of expression, and arbitrary detention of human rights defenders and civil society activists. Women remained under-represented in decision-making bodies. Insufficient efforts were made to guarantee the accessibility, availability and quality of healthcare and facilities. Environmental damage was caused by mining activities.

Background

President Sassou Nguesso was re-elected in March with 88.5% of the vote for a fourth successive term, and after 36 years in power over two separate periods. The integrity of the electoral process was contested by the opposition and civil society organizations.

The economic and social situation continued to deteriorate, due to the decline in oil revenue, public debt amounting to US\$10 billion, and the Covid-19 pandemic. There were ongoing court cases about charges of corruption involving people close to the president.

In November, the state of emergency was extended for the 27th time since March 2020, imposing restrictive measures to fight the Covid-19 pandemic.

Arbitrary detention

Civil society activists who were critical of the electoral process or who denounced human rights violations faced judicial harassment.

Alexandre Ibacka Dzabana, coordinator of the Congolese Platform of Human Rights and Democracy NGOs, and Chryst Dongui, vice-president of the association Ras le Bol, were both arrested outside their houses by unidentified men, on 11 March and 25 March respectively. The day before his arrest, Chryst Dongui had attended a press conference to denounce alleged irregularities in the electoral process. Alexandre Ibacka Dzabana had helped to organize a demonstration scheduled for 6 March to call for an inclusive national dialogue between the government, opposition parties and civil society organizations, and the release of political prisoners. The demonstration was banned by the authorities. The men, both human rights activists, were not brought before a prosecutor until 9 April, in contravention of Congolese law, and charged with breach of the state security. They were then sent to Brazzaville central prison where they were held until their release on 13 July, pending trial. During his detention the health of Alexandre Ibacka Dzabana, aged 77, seriously deteriorated but he was denied access to a doctor.

Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko, former candidate for the 2016 presidential election, returned to prison in October after having spent a year in the military hospital of Brazzaville. He was sentenced in 2018 to 20 years in prison for “breach of State security” and “illegal possession of weapons and ammunition of war”. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention considered his detention as arbitrary.

Freedom of expression and movement

Raymond Malonga, director of the satirical newspaper *Sel-Piment*, was arrested on 2 February while in hospital, on defamation charges for publishing an article which reported that someone close to President Sassou Nguesso had been accused of corruption. On 3 May, after three months in detention, he was sentenced to six months in prison and a fine of €45,000 for “defaming a member of the presidential family”. He was released in August.

On 11 December, Paulin Makaya, a political opponent who needed to receive medical treatment abroad, was prevented from leaving the country and his passport was confiscated. The authorities did not explain their decision. He was finally allowed to leave the country on 21 December.

Women's rights

Women remained under-represented in decision-making bodies, in violation of Article 17 of the 2015 Constitution, which “guarantees parity and ensures the promotion as well as the representativeness of women in all political, elective and administrative functions”.

On the occasion of International Women's Day, 8 March, the Ministry of Health, Population, Promotion of Women, and Integration of Women in Development regretted that women represented only 33% of the members of the Constitutional Court, 20% of elected officials in the senate and 11% in the national assembly. In August, the Consultative Council for Women called on the authorities to adopt the Parity Law, planned since 2016, as recommended by the CEDAW Committee in November 2018. The law is meant to guarantee parity and ensure the promotion and representativeness of women in all political, elective and administrative functions.

Right to health

The authorities made insufficient efforts to guarantee the accessibility, availability, and quality of healthcare and facilities.

The health budget was reduced to €290 million from the 2020 figure of €325 million. Hospitals, including the Brazzaville University and Hospital Centre, faced many difficulties, including shortages of water and electricity and the lack of proper facilities and equipment to administrate the needed care.¹ In August, the government made changes to the management of the Brazzaville University and Hospital Centre, noting major malfunctions. Several health facilities outside the capital city, Brazzaville, also experienced frequent drug shortages.

Health personnel continued to complain of a lack of PPE against Covid-19, as they had since the beginning of the pandemic. As of 31 December, 767,398 doses of vaccines against Covid-19 had been administered, but only 560,880 people had completed the vaccination schedule (in an estimated population of 5.5 million).

On 18 June, health workers from Edith Lucie Bongo Ondimba General Hospital in the town of Oyo went on strike, demanding the payment of at least seven months of salary arrears. This was in addition to the many strikes held by health workers to denounce salary arrears and malfunctions in health facilities in recent years, a situation which has led many health workers to leave the public sector to work in the private sector or to work abroad. According to the National Health Development Plan 2018-2022, more than 150 Congolese doctors were said to be practising outside the country.

Environmental degradation

Local populations in the department of Sangha denounced the pollution of rivers and deforestation caused by more than 10 years of gold mining. According to the Rainforest Journalism Fund, the companies responsible failed to respect environmental laws, and the authorities failed to take action to bring them to account.

1. [*Congo: On the Back of the Crisis. Violations of the Right to Health and Repression of Economic and Social Rights Defenders in the Republic of Congo* \(Index: AFR 22/3887/2021\), 19 April](#)



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Page 1 of 1

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