



Congo

Head of state	Denis Sassou-Nguesso
Head of government	Isidore Mvouba
Death penalty	abolitionist in practice
Population	3.8 million
Life expectancy	54 years
Under-5 mortality (m/f)	112/89 per 1,000
Adult literacy	84.7 per cent

Human rights defenders and journalists faced threats, arrests and detention. More than 30 people were arrested after a disturbance in July, some of whom were tortured or otherwise ill-treated. They were released without trial in December. Three asylum-seekers arrested in 2004 remained in custody without charge or trial. More than 30 people charged with endangering the security of the state after their arrest in 2005 were tried in June.

Background

More than five political parties declared their intention to field presidential candidates for the general elections scheduled for 2009. President Denis Sassou- Nguesso who returned to power in October 1997 was widely expected to be the candidate for a ruling coalition led by the Congolese Workers Party (Parti congolais du travail, PCT). Opposition political parties called for an independent electoral commission but their demand was not granted by the end of the year. In August, several opposition political parties withdrew from the National Commission for the Organization of Elections. They demanded guarantees that the elections in 2009 would be fair, that all political parties would have equal access to the media, that public bodies charged with organizing the elections would be impartial and that a new law setting up an independent electoral commission would be passed.

The ruling coalition won an overwhelming majority of seats during local and municipal elections in June. However, government critics accused the government of organizing the elections poorly, amid reports that voter turn-out was as low as 25 per cent.

The government announced a programme for the demobilization, disarmament and reintegration of fighters belonging to the former armed group, the National Resistance Council. In September the government announced that it had destroyed 500 weapons and tens of thousands of rounds of ammunition and explosives captured from or handed over by former armed opposition fighters.

"...Sylvestre Guy Poaty, was reportedly beaten in police custody and died in hospital..."

There was civil unrest in Pointe-Noire in July during the funeral of Thystère Tchicaya, leader of the Rally for Democracy and Social Progress. Some protesters damaged private and public property and shouted insults against President Nguesso. Several dozen people were arrested and at least 35 were detained until December.

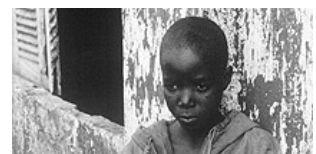
Nearly 40 former members of the security forces and civilians were tried in June on the charge of endangering the security of the state. Most of them had been arrested in early 2005 after a group of gendarmes were accused of stealing weapons from Bifouiti gendarmerie south of Brazzaville. Others, including civilians and a retired army colonel, had been arrested in Pointe-Noire in connection with an alleged coup plot. Ten of the defendants were not in court – some because they were living abroad and others because they had been granted provisional release and had not been informed of the trial date. When the trial ended on 27 June, the court found most of the defendants guilty of endangering the state and sentenced them to prison terms of up to three and a half years, which coincided with the period they had spent in custody or on provisional release. Those who had been in custody, including the alleged plot leader, Captain Bertin Pandi Ngouari, and retired army colonel Serge André Mpassi, were released immediately after the trial. Some of those tried and released claimed that they had been subjected to torture and other forms of ill-treatment during the months after their arrest in 2005.

Freedom of expression and association

Human rights defenders and journalists were threatened or arrested and detained for carrying out their professional activities.

In January, police in Brazzaville threatened the human rights group Observatoire congolais des droits de l'homme (OCDH) with closure if it did not desist from making public statements which the authorities deemed political. OCDH had earlier called for a postponement of local elections until an independent electoral commission had been set up and a reliable electoral register had been established.

- Christian Perrin, a journalist and head of news at Télé pour tous television station in Pointe-Noire, was arrested on 21 July and detained for 24 hours. He was subsequently charged with inciting violence. The charge related to the station's coverage of riots on 7 July and criticism of the government by members of



an opposition political party during a television programme. The High Court in Pointe-Noire found him guilty and sentenced him to a fine in August.

- Gilbert Tsonguissa Moulangu, a member of the Pan-African Union for Social Democracy (UPADS) political party, was arrested and detained in December after he addressed a meeting in Brazzaville. During the meeting, he had shown a video message by a UPADS leader living in exile after he was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment in 2001. The message criticized the government and factions of the UPADS. Gilbert Moulangu was charged with endangering the security of the state and issuing false information. He was still held without trial at the end of the year.



Child refugee (orphan).

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Arrest, detention and ill-treatment of alleged rioters

Several dozen people, most of them youths, were arrested on and soon after 7 July following riots in Pointe-Noire during the funeral of Thystère Tchicaya. Some of those arrested and initially detained by members of the security forces were reportedly beaten and subjected to other forms of ill-treatment. One of those arrested, Sylvestre Guy Poaty, was reportedly beaten in police custody and died in hospital on 19 July. Another detainee, Sita Ndombet, a national of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), reportedly became a victim of enforced disappearance after he was removed from prison by members of the security forces. Government officials claimed that he had escaped. His whereabouts remained unknown at the end of the year.

After numerous calls by opposition political leaders and human rights defenders for the release of the alleged rioters, the Minister of Justice said on television on 16 December that the state had lost interest in prosecuting them. At least 35 who were still being held were released without trial on 18 December.

Long-term detention without trial of asylum-seekers

Three asylum-seekers from the DRC arrested in March 2004 remained in the custody of the military security service without charge or trial. Germain Ndabamenya Etikilome, Médard Mabwaka Egbonde and Bosch Ndala Umba were accused of spying for the DRC at the time of their arrest but were never charged with any offence. The authorities did not reveal why the three men continued to be held without charge or trial.

Amnesty International visits

Amnesty International delegates visited the country in July.