



FREEDOM HOUSE

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Freedom in the World - Congo, Republic of (Brazzaville) (2009)

Capital: Brazzaville

Population:
3,800,000

Political Rights Score: 6 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

In late 2007, President Denis Sassou-Nguesso created a 60-party political coalition, the Rally of the Presidential Majority (RMP), to broaden his support ahead of the 2009 presidential election. The bloc performed well in local elections in June, capturing a sizable majority of council seats. In early 2008, the government settled a long-running dispute with its creditors, who in the past had accused Congo of hiding oil revenues and refusing to pay its debts.

Congo's history since independence from France in 1960 has been marked by armed conflict and a series of coups. Army officer Marien Ngouabi seized power in 1968 but was assassinated in 1977, when Colonel (later General) Joachim Yhomby-Opango took over. Colonel Denis Sassou-Nguesso, then the defense minister, overthrew Yhomby-Opango two years later. Domestic and international pressure forced Sassou-Nguesso to convene a national conference and hold multiparty presidential elections in 1992. He lost, coming in third in the first round. In the runoff, former prime minister Pascal Lissouba defeated Bernard Kolelas.

Disputed parliamentary elections in 1993 triggered violent clashes between rival militia groups. The fighting ended in 1997, when Sassou-Nguesso ousted Lissouba with the help of Angolan troops and French political support. Lissouba, who fled into exile, was convicted in absentia in 2001 on treason and corruption charges. Kolelas, a former mayor of Brazzaville and founder of the dreaded "Ninja" militia, was accused of war crimes and sentenced to death in absentia in 2000, but he was granted amnesty in 2005 and returned to Congo.

Sassou-Nguesso oversaw the adoption of a new constitution by referendum in 2002. He won the presidential election that year with more than 89 percent of the vote after his main challenger, former National Assembly president Andre Milongo, claimed that the vote was rigged and withdrew. In the 2002 legislative elections, Sassou-Nguesso's Congolese Labor Party (PCT) and its allies obtained about 90 percent of the seats. The polls failed to foster genuine reconciliation and dialogue, although a March 2003 peace agreement was signed by virtually all of the country's rebel factions. This enabled the government, with World Bank support, to launch a program to demobilize an estimated 30,000 combatants and retrieve thousands of illegal weapons.

The 2007 legislative elections were boycotted by the main opposition parties after the government ignored calls to create an independent electoral commission. The PCT and its allies won 125 out of 137 seats in the National Assembly. Given the opposition boycott, the participation of Frederic Bintsangou's National Resistance Council (CNR), a former rebel group based in the southern Pool region, was hailed as a major step toward peace. The president appointed Bintsangou as minister of state for humanitarian affairs in 2007 as part of a peace agreement, but he has yet to take up this position.

In December 2007, Sassou-Nguesso made minor cabinet changes following the release of the by-election results. Notably, members of the second-largest party in the National Assembly, Kolelas's Congolese Movement for Democracy and Integral Development (MCDDI), were included in government for the first time.

In early 2008, a new political coalition, the Rally of the Presidential Majority (RMP), was formed by 60 parties. The bloc, led by the PCT, was seeking to broaden the government's support ahead of the 2009 elections; the PCT's base was largely limited to northern parts of the country. While the MCDDI had not yet joined the RMP at year's end, its inclusion in the government strengthened its ties with the ruling party.

Local elections took place in June 2008 amid low voter turnout. The RMP made a strong showing, winning 564 out of 864 council seats. Councilors from seven departments subsequently elected members of the national Senate, marking the first time the departments of Pool and Pointe-Noire chose senators. The RMP secured 34 out of the 42 seats in the Senate. In preparation for the 2009 presidential elections, the government has stated that it will update the electoral registry rather than carry out a new voter census, which has been criticized by opposition leaders. By the end of 2008, the government continued to refuse to establish an independent electoral commission, and one opposition party, the Union for Democracy and the Republic-Mwindanda (UDR-Mwindanda), declared that it would boycott the election unless this were to change.

Congo is one of sub-Saharan Africa's major oil producers, which has led to strong economic ties with France and other European states. In 2004, the Paris Club of creditor countries granted Congo a significant debt write-off, followed in 2007 by a similar write-off from the London Club. In early 2008, the government settled a long-running dispute with its creditors who in the past had accused Congo of hiding oil revenues and refusing to pay its debts. In June, the government signed a new staff-monitored program (SMP) with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which may help the country meet the completion point of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative and thereby qualify for more debt relief. However, the government was expected to come under pressure to increase spending ahead of the 2009 presidential election.

Despite Congo's natural wealth, corruption and decades of instability have worsened humanitarian conditions. Congo ranked 139 out of 177 countries on the 2007/2008 UN Human Development Index. However, in 2008, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) decided to wrap up its operations in the Pool region due to improved humanitarian conditions, and a new national disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program was launched for some 30,000 former combatants.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

The Republic of Congo is not an electoral democracy. Elections held in 2002 and 2007 were not deemed fair, largely because of irregularities and the absence of an independent electoral commission. The 2008 local elections were peaceful and much better organized than the 2007 legislative elections, which were disorganized and marred by irregularities, but had similarly low voter turnout. The amended constitution of 2002 limits the president to two seven-year terms. The bicameral Parliament comprises a 66-seat Senate and a 137-seat National Assembly; members of both houses are elected for five-year terms, but senators are chosen by lawmakers at the department level rather than by popular vote. Most of the over 200 registered political parties are personality driven and ethnically based. The ruling coalition faces a weak and fragmented political opposition.

Corruption in Congo's extractive industries remains pervasive. According to the IMF and World Bank, the government maintains inadequate internal controls and accounting systems. In November 2007, Congo was readmitted into the diamond trade's Kimberly Process after a three-year expulsion due to discrepancies between production and exports. In early 2008, the Anti-Corruption Observatory (ACO) became operational. Parliament passed a law creating this body in 2007, and it is tasked with increasing transparency and government accountability. In February 2008, Congo became an Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) Candidate Country after satisfying four sign-up indicators.

President Denis Sassou-Nguesso and his family have been beset by allegations of graft. In 2008, the watchdog organization Global Witness publicized the spending habits of one of the president's sons, Denis Christel Sassou-Nguesso. The organization reported extravagant credit-card purchases and evidence of state oil company kickbacks. Congo was ranked 158 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perception Index.

Despite the abolition of censorship and the introduction of reduced penalties for defamation in 2000, the government's respect for press freedom is limited. Several cases of journalists being assaulted or arrested were reported in 2008. In September, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) called for an investigation into the assault of journalist Giscard Mahoungou by Congolese police while covering a student protest. Speech that incites ethnic hatred, violence, or civil war is illegal. The government monopolizes the broadcast media, which reach a much larger audience than print publications. However, about 10 private newspapers that appear weekly in Brazzaville often publish articles and editorials that are critical of the government. There are no

government restrictions on internet access.

Religious and academic freedoms are guaranteed and respected. Freedoms of assembly and association are generally upheld, although public demonstrations are rare. Nongovernmental organizations operate more or less without interference. Workers' rights to join trade unions and to strike are legally protected, and collective bargaining is practiced freely. Most workers in the formal business sector, including the oil industry, are union members, and unions have made efforts to organize informal sectors, such as agriculture and retail trade.

Congo's weak judiciary is subject to corruption and political influence. Members of the country's poorly coordinated security forces act with impunity in committing human rights abuses, and there have been reports of suspects dying during apprehension or in custody. Prison conditions are life threatening. Women and men, as well as juveniles and adults, are incarcerated together, and rape is common.

Ethnic discrimination persists. Members of Sassou-Nguesso's northern ethnic group and related clans dominate key posts in government. Pygmy groups suffer discrimination, and many are effectively held in lifetime servitude through customary ties to ethnic Bantu "patrons." One small positive development occurred in March 2008, when the High Court approved an indictment on charges relating to the forced disappearance 19 years ago of a child from an indigenous family. Members of virtually all ethnicities favor their own groups in hiring practices, and urban neighborhoods tend to be segregated.

Harassment by military personnel and militia groups inhibits travel, though such practices have declined. Congo's judicial system offers few protections for business and property rights. The country ranked 178 out of 181 nations surveyed in the World Bank's 2008 Doing Business index.

Despite constitutional safeguards, legal and societal discrimination against women persists. Access to education and employment, especially in the countryside, is limited, and civil codes and traditional practices regarding family and marriage formalize women's inferior status; for example, adultery is illegal for women but not for men. Under traditional or common-law marriages, widows often do not inherit any portion of their spouses' estates and divorce is financially difficult for women. Violence against women is reportedly widespread. Abortion is prohibited.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*