

Polity IV Country Report 2010: Gabon

<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Score:</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2009</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2010</td> <td style="width: 15%;">Change</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Polity:</td> <td>3</td> <td>3</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Democ:</td> <td>4</td> <td>4</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Autoc:</td> <td>1</td> <td>1</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Durable:</td> <td></td> <td>1</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tentative:</td> <td></td> <td>Yes</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Score:	2009	2010	Change	Polity:	3	3	0	Democ:	4	4	0	Autoc:	1	1	0	Durable:		1		Tentative:		Yes		
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SCODE	GAB	CCODE	481	Date of Report	1 June 2011																				
Polity IV Component Variables																									
XRREG	XRCOMP	XROPEN	XCONST	PARREG	PARCOMP																				
2	2	4	4	3	3																				
Date of Most Recent Polity Transition (3 or more point change)																									
End Date	15 October 2009		Begin Date	16 October 2009																					
Polity Fragmentation: No																									
Constitution	1997																								
Executive(s)	President Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba (PDG); directly elected 30 August 2009, 41.7%																								
Legislature	Bicameral: National Assembly (120 seats; 111 directly elected, 9 appointed by the president; most recent elections, 17 and 24 December 2006) Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG): 82 National Woodcutters' Rally/Rally for Gabon (RNB/RPG): 8 Union of the Gabonese People (UPG): 8 Other parties: 18 Non-partisans: 4 Senate (91 seats; elected by local and departmental councillors; most recent elections, 26 January and 9 February 2003) PDG: 53 RNB: 20 Other parties: 9 Non-partisans: 9																								
Judiciary	Supreme Court																								

Narrative Description:¹

Executive Recruitment: Transitional or Restricted Elections (7)

Gabon is a multiparty republic dominated by the executive branch of the government. The 1991 constitution limited the holder of the presidency to two five-year terms. However, a new constitution, adopted in 1997, extended the presidential term to seven years. President El Hadj Omar Bongo, of the Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG), has held office since 1967 when he succeeded President M'ba upon his death. Upon assuming office Bongo declared Gabon a one-party state in 1968 and founded the Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG). Bongo has served as president ever since – he was most recently reelected for another 7-year term in November 2005 elections with seventy-nine percent of the vote. Although multiparty elections are regularly held, elections are uncompetitive and, moreover, there is scant evidence that President Bongo would allow himself to be removed from office. Electoral functions are controlled by an agency of the government and there is no independent monitoring of the election results. Elections in 1998 were neither free nor fair as participation was manipulated through incomplete or inaccurate ballots.

In July 2003 parliament approved an amendment to the constitution that would allow President Omar Bongo to seek reelection indefinitely. In addition to abolishing the two-term limit on executive power, constitutional changes were also made that eliminated the “two round” polling system. This new “single round” system, which does not require a second round of polling if none of the presidential candidates received 50% of the ballots cast, is expected to help the electoral prospects of President Bongo, whose popularity has slipped in recent years. Despite this drop in support, Bongo still managed to win the 27 November 2005 presidential election with 79.18% of the vote, handily defeating his most popular rival, Pierre Mamboundou of the Union of the Gabonese People (UPG), who won only 13.61% of the vote. Such a victory, however, is more a sign of effective voter fraud than popular support.

Gabon's leader of 42 years, Omar Bongo Ondimba, died in office on 8 June 2009. He was succeeded by the President of the Senate, Rose Francine Rogombé, who was sworn in as Acting President on 10 June 2009. A presidential election was held on 30 August 2009, resulting in a plurality win for Ali-Ben Bongo Ondimba, son of the late president. Bongo's election was rejected by the opposition and triggered mass protests and charges of interference by France. Violent protests by opposition parties in Port-Gentil, the second largest city in the country and opposition stronghold, produced four official deaths but local reports suggest many more. In an effort to quell the unrest, the military was deployed to the city for three months. This violence triggered a review of the elections by the Constitutional Court. This judicial body subsequently verified the veracity of his victory leading to the inauguration of Ali Bongo on 16 October 2009.

Executive Constraints: Intermediary Category (4)

Gabon is a republic dominated by a strong presidency. While the President may preside over an “open” constitutional order, in reality, power is highly concentrated and political competition is significantly restricted. Sub-national officials, provincial governors, prefects, and sub-prefects are officers of the central government, responsible to the president. The National Assembly and Senate function mainly to approve presidential initiatives, although they do occasionally refuse to do so. The president has the power to veto legislation, dissolve the national legislature, call new elections, and issue decrees that have the force of law when the legislative branch is not in session. These powers render the legislature virtually powerless. The judiciary is independent and has taken an increasingly active role in politics, annulling twenty constituencies after the 2005 election. The courts, however, remain vulnerable to government manipulation as the president appoints and can dismiss judges.

Historically, political power has been highly centralized around the personality of Omar Bongo Ondimba. With his passing in 2009, it is unclear whether his son, Ali Bongo, will be able to wield authority in the same manner. Up until his ascension to the post of president, Ali Bongo had been largely unpopular with the party cadres of the PDG. Many, in fact, had wanted a new leader from outside the Bongo family to rule the country in the name of the party. Ten rival PDG candidates sought the party's nomination prior to the August 2009 presidential polls but, in the end, the Bongo family was able to garner enough support to gain the nomination.

¹ The research described in this report was sponsored by the Political Instability Task Force (PITF). The PITF is funded by the Central Intelligence Agency. The views expressed herein are the authors' alone and do not represent the views of the US Government.

Political Participation: Factional/Restricted Competition (6)

The PDG, comprised of the ethnic Bakete from the south of the country, continues to dominate the government despite the fact that opposition parties were made legal in 1990. Two other opposition parties have achieved some representation in the legislature but are largely weak due to ideological splits: the RNB, made up of the Fang ethnicity group from the North; and the RPG, made up of Myene from the coastal region. There is some correlation between ethnic and political cleavages, but the government generally fosters ethnic balance in the public sector, in which persons from all major ethnic groups continue to occupy prominent positions (although the Bateke dominate the security forces). Following the December 2001 legislative elections, which were marred by violence, organizational problems, and low urban turnout, the main opposition party accepted President Bongo's invitation to form an "open government" in which the opposition holds several government posts. National Assembly elections in December 2006 reinforced the dominance of the PDG, with the six largest opposition parties securing a total of only seventeen seats in the 120-member body.

In early March 2010 the National Union party was formed, uniting many of Gabon's main opposition candidates and parties. The stated goal of the new party was to overcome the fractionalization of the opposition camp that has helped perpetuate PDG rule since the return of electoral politics in 1990. Included in the new party is Adre Mba Obame, an independent candidate who came in second in the August 2009 presidential ballot with 26% of the vote. The National Union was given official recognition by the government in mid-April 2010. Also, in the spring of 2010 Ali Bongo consolidated his authority within the ruling PDG by being selected party chairman, a post long held by his father.