

Failed Coup Attempt in Gabon

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On January 7, a small group of Gabonese soldiers seized the state broadcasting building in Gabon's capital, Libreville, and declared their intention to overthrow the government of President Ali Bongo Ondimba. Within hours, security forces retook the building and put down the coup attempt. The attempt followed months of political uncertainty after the president (aged 59) [suffered a stroke](#) in Saudi Arabia in October 2018; he has since remained outside the country and is currently convalescing in Morocco.

Separately, the coup attempt came days after President Trump announced the [deployment](#), beginning on January 2, of "approximately 80" U.S. military personnel to Libreville as a standby force to protect "U.S. citizens, personnel, and diplomatic facilities" in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), should the security situation there deteriorate in the wake of December 2018 elections. Shortly after the coup attempt, a U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) spokesperson [stated](#) that "there is no change in the status" of that deployment, and that U.S. forces were not presently tasked with securing diplomatic assets (or any other mission) in Gabon.

An oil-rich former French colony on the geostrategic Gulf of Guinea, Gabon has long been considered a stable—if authoritarian-leaning—country in a tumultuous region. U.S. interests center on Gabon's role in regional conflict resolution, maritime security, and environmental conservation. Prolonged unrest in Gabon could pose challenges for U.S.-Gabonese ties and worsen prospects for stability in Central Africa, which faces several violent political crises.

Figure 1. Gabon



General

Capital: Libreville

Comparative size: Slightly smaller than Colorado.

Independence: 1960, from France.

People

Languages: French (official), Fang, Myene, Nzebi, Bapounou/Eschira, Bandjabi.

Religions: Christian 82%, Muslim 9.8%, other/none 8.2% (2012).

Population, growth rate: 2.1 million, 2.7%.

Literacy: 83.2% (male 85.3%, female 81%) (2015).

Health

Median age, life expectancy: 21 years, 68 years.

Infant mortality rate: 32.9 deaths/1,000 live births.

Adult HIV/AIDS adult prevalence: 4.2% (2017).

Economy

GDP: \$17.2 billion, \$8,385 per capita.

GDP growth rate: 2.0%.

Top exports: crude oil, timber, manganese, uranium.

Top export partners: China 36.4%, United States 10%, Ireland 8.5%, Netherlands 6.3%, South Korea 5.1%, Australia 5%, Italy 4.6% (2017)

Top imports: machinery + equipment, foodstuffs, chemicals, construction materials.

Top import partners: France 23.6%, Belgium 19.6%, China 15.2% (2017)

Source: Graphic created by CRS from map resources. Figures from CIA World Factbook, UNAIDS, and the International Monetary Fund; 2018 estimates unless otherwise indicated.

Background

Gabon's oil wealth and sparse population contribute to a relatively high per-capita gross domestic product (GDP) of [\\$8,385](#). Income inequality and poverty remain high, however, and state services are [reportedly](#) poor. The oil-dominated economy has recently been hamstrung by the global downturn in energy prices: growth, which averaged over 4.9% annually between 2010 and 2016, [dropped to 0.5% in 2017](#) before rebounding moderately to 2.0% in 2018. Nominal per-capita income [has dropped by 23% since 2011](#).

President Bongo was first elected in 2009, succeeding his father, El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba, who held the office for over 40 years. The military and the ruling Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG), which dominates the legislature, are widely seen as [key pillars](#) of his administration. He won reelection by a razor-thin margin in 2016, a vote that was criticized by European Union observers and marred by a violent government [crackdown on large opposition demonstrations](#). Freedom House considers Gabon "Not Free," [noting](#) that Bongo "maintains political dominance through a pervasive patronage system and restrictions on dissent." [According to the State Department](#), key human rights challenges include "harsh prison conditions; an inefficient judiciary subject to government influence; interference with the right of assembly; government corruption; trafficking in persons; and child labor."

Uncertainty has permeated Gabon since October 2018, when President Bongo suffered a stroke. Speculation about Bongo's fitness for office has since flourished as the government has provided little information about his health. After a month in Saudi Arabia, Bongo relocated to Morocco. In mid-November, the Constitutional Court [altered the constitution](#) to allow the vice president or prime minister to execute key presidential functions when the president is "temporarily" unavailable—thus averting the need to hold fresh elections, as the constitution requires when the president is permanently incapacitated. [Opposition groups decried the amendment](#) as undemocratic and designed to prolong Bongo's rule.

Coup Attempt and Context

Early on January 7, a small group of junior soldiers—[some wearing uniforms of the Republican Guard](#), an elite unit that protects the presidency—seized control of the state broadcaster. Alleging that Bongo was unfit to govern, the coup leader called for the establishment of a council to oversee a transition to democracy. Reports suggest that "[about 300 people](#)" may have rallied in support of the conspirators. Security forces promptly regained control of the building and arrested several conspirators, including the leader, while killing two [amid reports of scattered gunfire](#). The government [reportedly](#) cut internet and national radio broadcasts during the response. By mid-morning, Gabonese authorities announced that the putsch had been repelled.

The coup attempt in Gabon comes amid a broader deterioration in governance and security conditions in Central Africa. [Like several other countries in the sub-region](#), Gabon has discarded term limits on the presidency. According to Freedom House's annual *Freedom in the World* index, countries in Central Africa broadly "[have suffered major setbacks](#)" in democratic governance. The recent, much [delayed and problematic](#) elections in DRC may augur increased violence in that country, where years of conflict have produced one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. Newer crises in the Central African Republic, Burundi, and Cameroon have also spurred large population displacements and humanitarian needs.

U.S. Relations

[According to the State Department](#), "Gabon and the United States share a commitment to diversify and strengthen

Gabon's economy, expand bilateral trade, ensure security in the Gulf of Guinea, and combat wildlife trafficking." Nonetheless, the country is a minor recipient of U.S. aid: [bilateral State Department and USAID-administered assistance](#) totaled \$641,000 in FY2017, with the Trump Administration requesting \$200,000 for FY2019, all for military training. Gabon has also benefitted from U.S. funds provided on a global or regional basis to support maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea, peacekeeping capabilities, and environmental conservation, among other aims. Gabon participates in the U.S. Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment ([CARPE](#)), which protects tropical forests in the Congo River basin. The Department of Defense has provided maritime security assistance, including through the AFRICOM/U.S. Navy's Africa Partnership Station initiative.

In 2018, the Trump Administration [imposed restrictions](#) on certain types of U.S. aid to Gabon under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (Division A of [P.L. 106-386](#), as amended), pursuant to Gabon's designation as a Tier 3 Country (worst-performing) in the State Department's 2018 [Trafficking in Persons Report](#). The impact of such restrictions on U.S.-Gabonese relations remains to be seen.