



Coup supporters cheer police officers in Libreville, Gabon, on Wednesday. (AP photo)

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Gabon: the coup epidemic continues
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GABON: THE COUP EPIDEMIC CONTINUES

Even before the latest coup d'état in Gabon, Emmanuel Macron had observed that there was an 'epidemic of putsches' [1] in the frank language that does not always characterise diplomatic circles, and he was talking only about the Sahel. In fact, there have been seven coups d'état in Africa since 2020... and all in French-speaking Africa with the exception of Sudan.

We're not really surprised to see Ali Bongo fall by force of arms [2], we just find it ironic that it should be because of his Praetorian Guard, the Presidential Guard that was supposed to protect him, and at the head of which he had placed his cousin Brice Oligui Nguema (name to remember, he's likely to be at the head of the country for a while). That said, it was also the Presidential Guard that brought down President Bazoum in Niger a few weeks ago, even though the latter's democratic legitimacy was in no way comparable to that of Ali, 'son of'. This shows that playing the security card as a guarantee of stability is an illusion: when the armed forces realise that a regime can only hold out because of the fear they inspire, they are tempted to play their own game.

GABON: AN UNUSUAL PUTSCH

On the other hand, it is surprising that in the hours immediately following the coup, France, according to its Prime Minister, was content to '*follow the situation with the greatest attention*'. It was then necessary for China - paragon of democracy - to call for an '*immediate return to normal order*' for France to decide to '*condemn*' the coup (but not



A vandalised billboard of former Gabonese president Ali Bongo is seen in Libreville, (AP Photo)

'firmly', as is customary, but rather by paying lip service). The possibility of playing China or Russia off against the former colonial power was indeed a factor in the putschists' calculations. Chinese dollars easily replace AFD, and Wagner's Russia offers an alternative to military cooperation in terms of armed support: the Kremlin, which is '*concerned*' and '*keeping a close eye*' on the situation in Libreville, does not need to instigate or even support a coup d'état, but can be satisfied with opportunistically reaping the geopolitical benefits a posteriori. In any case, the international community as a whole knew that the Gabonese regime was at the end of its tether, that Ali was tired and that the elections had been rigged, and so it should not be long before it ratified, almost relieved, its downfall.

Hypothesis number 1 is therefore that the initiative for the putsch simply came from the head of the Presidential Guard, potentially incited by competition within the Bongo clan [3].

And if this coup d'état worked after several failed attempts [4], it was due to several intelligently thought-out factors:

Firstly, the timing, i.e. immediately after the presidential elections, the result of which was about to be contested, as usual, by the opposition and the street [5]: the coup plotters (sorry, the 'Committee for the Transition and Restoration of Institutions') can thus present themselves as the guardians of democracy, and that's where we are: *'The constitution was flouted, the election method itself was not good. So the army has decided to turn the page, to assume its responsibilities'* [6].

ROLE OF THE REPUBLICAN GUARD

In the end, Brice Oligui Nguema was counting on the fact that the democratic illegitimacy of an incumbent power makes a military coup almost legitimate, or at least desired by the people, in order to get rid of it. In this case, he knew he could count on the tacit acceptance of Albert Ondo Ossa, the sole candidate chosen to represent the main opposition parties; the latter's campaign manager, Mike Joctane, explained immediately after the coup that *'part of the army has taken its responsibilities'*, without therefore condemning it [7].

What's more, although the Republican Guard (the Green Berets) appear to have been behind the putsch, they took care to demonstrate the unity of the country's armed forces by including representatives of both the regular army and the police in their first televised statement.

The coup plotters also presented their actions as a clean-up operation against

corruption, which allowed them to play on the population's exasperation with the nepotism of the government and to arrest Ali's bodyguards on the grounds of 'massive misappropriation of public funds'[8].

In fact, no one was going to stand up to save a regime whose decades of corruption had been well documented (notably the notorious *Biens Mal Acquis*, the hobbyhorse of William Bourdon and Transparency International [9]) and well known to the Gabonese people. On the contrary, groups of citizens very quickly took to the streets of the country's major cities to applaud the military, speaking of *'liberation'* and shouting *'Bongo out!'* So it was without fear that the new de facto authorities re-established the Internet in the country, knowing that the vox populi and the resonance chambers of the social networks were in their favour.

Another proof of the tactical intelligence of the Gabonese military is the fact that they did not take the international community head-on, as the Sahel putschists had done out of nationalist Sankarist bravado. On the contrary, they took care to declare first and foremost that *'we reaffirm our attachment to respecting Gabon's commitments to the international community'* (in other words, *'funds from the World Bank and the IMF will always be welcome'*). Similarly, no anti-French rhetoric was deployed, not only because this would not go down well with Gabonese public opinion, which has not (yet?) been manipulated by Russian propaganda, but above all because realpolitik requires us to take into account both France's economic weight (Eramet cannot be replaced so easily) and the presence of several hundred pre-positioned soldiers in the country.

The fact remains that France is not immune from accusations of having allowed this to happen, not only because its detractors believe that its foreign intelligence services would have been able to get wind of such a project, but also because Ali Bongo, offended by the French reaction to his election in 2016, had not only put obstacles in the way of several French companies, but had also moved towards other international partners [10] (including Mohammed VI's Morocco, where Brice Oligui Nguema was trained [11]).

A ROUGH PATCH FOR FRANCE

The fact remains that the timing of the coup d'état is very bad for the French executive, which justified its stand-off with the new de facto authorities in Niger [12] by the desire not to endorse coups d'état in order to avoid contagion... The impossibility of reaching agreement on this point with the United States, which has abandoned its call for the reinstatement of President Bazoum, vindicates the putschists, who know how to play off the competition between the powers, further weakening France's position in the region.

This latest African putsch should serve as a renewed incentive to support legitimate opposition in all AU member states, so that the alternative to sclerotic powers is not the armed forces. Such is the case of Chad, presented as the last line of defence against terrorism in the Sahel, but which can only hold on by force of arms, which is not viable in the long term, as history has shown. The same applies to Congo-Kinshasa, the largest state in sub-Saharan Africa and the largest French-speaking country in the world, which is due to hold elections

in December. The united international community must ensure well in advance that these elections comply with democratic standards, so that the civilian power that emerges is fully legitimate and (therefore) operational. In addition to the DRC, elections are also scheduled in Liberia in October, and in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire in 2024: the first step is to put an end to the tradition of the Big Man, the Gaullist saviour of last resort, and to rely rationally and strategically on organised and mature African civil society movements.

Sources

- [1] At the last conference of French ambassadors held a few days ago at the Elysée Palace.
- [2] <https://www.revueconflits.com/fabien-blanc-gabon-omar-bongo/> 'risk of political implosion'.
- [3] It will be interesting to see whether Omar Denis Junior Bongo, who is in conflict with Ali and Nouredin Bongo, takes up an important post in the near future.
- [4] <https://www.revueconflits.com/fabien-blanc-gabon-omar-bongo/> ('7 January 2019, coup attempt by officers quickly foiled by security forces').
- [5] 'The general elections of 26 August 2023 and the truncated results are annulled.'
- [6] Since the 2009 election - which should have been won by André Mba Obame - Ali Bongo has been a contested president. In 2016, his results in the province of Haut-Ogooué (the Bongo stronghold) had to be further inflated to give him a narrow lead over Jean Ping. In 2023, the elections were organised without any foreign observers having been accredited, and without any visas having been issued to foreign journalists. France 24, RFI and TV5 Monde, which have a strong local following, were also suspended.
- [7] Moreover, on 26 August Ondo Ossa warned Bongo that he did not have the loyalty of the army or the Republican Guard.
- [8] Knowing that Brice Oligui Nguema, the cleaner, was nabbed by the OCCRP for having bought three properties in Maryland, in 2015 and 2018, for 1 million dollars... in cash.
- [9] <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/gabon-la-justice-francaise-reconnait-letat-comme-victime-dans-le-dossier-des-biens-mal>
- [10] <https://www.revueconflits.com/fabien-blanc-gabon-omar-bongo/> ('relations between the two countries have become somewhat strained' until 'Veolia, was seized by the Gabonese government')
- [11] At the Royal Military Academy in Meknes.
- [12] Ambassador Sylvain Itté, in particular, was retained against the advice of the junta.