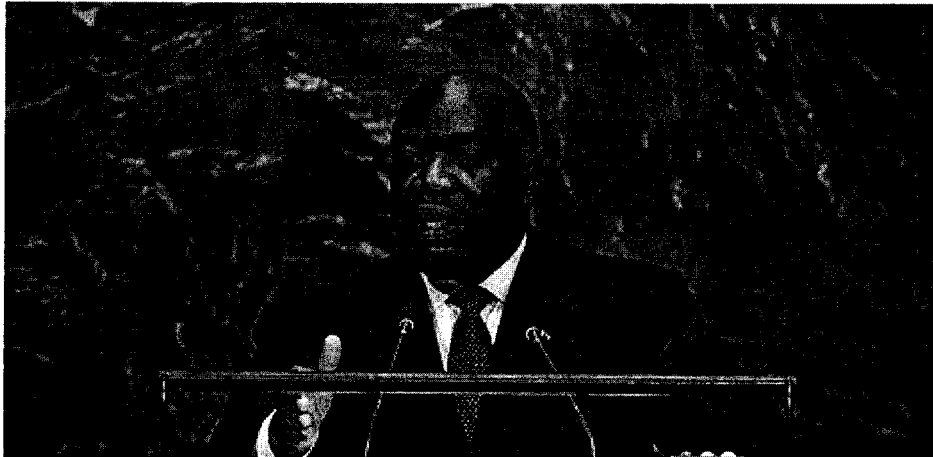




TENSIONS RUNNING HIGH IN GABON



By Eva Michaels (<http://www.egmontinstitute.be/expert-author/eva-michaels/>) (21 January 2019)
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In response to a short-lived coup attempt against absentee President Ali Bongo Ondimba, Gabonese authorities were quick to project images of control and normalcy. Yet measures to restrict and distort the flow of news and information, making it difficult to fully evaluate the situation, have highlighted rather than concealed signs of political turbulence. Read more below.

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TENSIONS RUNNING HIGH IN GABON:

In response to a short-lived coup attempt against absentee President Ali Bongo Ondimba, Gabonese authorities were quick to project images of control and normalcy. Yet measures to restrict and distort the flow of news and information, making it difficult to fully evaluate the situation, have highlighted rather than concealed signs of political turbulence. The surprise

appointment[1] of Julien Nkoghe Bekalé as Prime Minister and his immediate formation of a new government, which is almost identical to the previous one, was a fresh attempt by the weakened regime to shore up its support base. While it first seemed that a looming constitutional crisis[2] might have been averted with the President's return after 12 weeks of convalescence in Saudi Arabia and Morocco, he spent only one day in Libreville before resuming his medical leave in Rabat. Things will likely not be getting back to 'normal' anytime soon.

High-stakes gamble

On 7 January, Gabon woke to news that the national TV and radio station had been seized by members of the hitherto unknown Patriotic Youth Movement of the Defence and Security Forces. Their leader, 26-year old Lieutenant Kelly Ondo Obiang, broadcast a statement in which he expressed frustration with the President's struggles to carry out his official functions after suffering an apparent stroke.[3] Obiang accused the army high command of being complicit in political manipulations and failing to defend the nation's interests. He vowed to take power from those who had been responsible for the 2016 post-election violence under the eyes of the 'illegitimate and illegal' institutions. Obiang called on the people of Gabon to take control of the streets and occupy places of strategic interest in an attempt to 'save the democracy'. He ended his appeal by summoning various public figures and opponents of the regime to the National Assembly in preparation for the establishment of a National Council of Restoration.

The Gendarmerie Intervention Group stormed the building shortly afterwards, killing two of the plotters and liberating five station employees who had been taken hostage. Four other group members were arrested and are now facing life imprisonment.[4] As part of a broader response, the Republican Guard showed a strong security presence in the capital Libreville and the border with Cameroon was temporarily closed. Amidst an internet shutdown for 28 hours and conflicting details emerging, misinformation was shared on social networks and by media organisations, among others in the form of early reports that the army had taken over the capital or that Obiang had been killed.[5]

The attempt at unseating the President was ill-planned, lacking support within the military hierarchy. The small group of junior officers were members of the Republican Guard, with some deputy command responsibilities in the Guard of Honour. However, they did not have control of the Republican Guard's weapons[6] which hampered the prospects of a successful overthrow, including preventing a counter-coup. No further armed action or public meetings in support of the attempted coup were reported, apart from some 300 people gathering outside *Radio Télévision Gabonaise* and a protest march in support of Jean Ping, Bongo Ondimba's rival during the 2016 presidential election – both soon dispersed by the police.

While a large majority of the public reject the prospect of military rule, only one in 10 citizens are reportedly satisfied with the status quo and support for political change is strong.[7] The incident has hit a nerve on social media where #OperationDignité and #JeSuisKellyObiang are still trending. More attention should focus on whether high levels of public dissatisfaction, especially among the younger generation, are also spreading to the military hierarchy as the events of 7 January seem to have suggested. This will need to be linked to a broader analysis of whether the attempted coup was indeed an isolated act[8] or whether this was an indicator of tensions within the powerful Republican Guard – generally associated with regime stability – or an indicator that the plotters had some support within the government. An investigation of how the Republican Guard’s senior leadership has responded and whether the regime has made any personnel changes in the military hierarchy since the attempted coup will be a helpful starting point. Gabon is assumed to be coup-proof, with control of the security forces tightly in the hands of the Bongo family. Yet there have also been reports of growing rivalry vis-à-vis a power vacuum, among others between the President’s half-brother, in charge of intelligence, and his Chief of Staff.[9]

The political malaise, aggravated by Ondimba Bongo’s long leave, has been extensively discussed. In the President’s absence, the Constitutional Court amended the constitution in November 2018 and transferred part of his powers to the Prime Minister and Vice President. This contributed to a growing sense of uncertainty about who is pulling the strings and where the country is heading. In the past, an uneasy calm had usually returned to Gabon after a political crisis – as could last be observed after the highly disputed 2016 presidential elections. Amidst accusations that Gabon has been ‘on autopilot’ for too long,[10] tensions are now running higher than before. A new National Assembly has only just been formed, after the work of the previous one had been suspended in April 2018. The President attended the inauguration ceremony of Bekalé’s government on 15 January in Libreville which was closed to the media and public. Yet his brief presence – he returned to Morocco in the evening as discreetly as he had arrived – raised more questions than answers about his ability to govern the country. Eyes are now on the next actions of his inner circle. It remains to be seen whether the regime survives in the President’s continued absence or whether this is the beginning of the end of 50 years of family rule in Gabon.

Eva Michaels is a freelance foreign policy and conflict analyst focusing on Central Africa and French, British and EU Africa policy. She holds a PhD in War Studies from King’s College London and has previously worked in higher education and for various think tanks.

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EGMONT


Royal Institute for International Relations
Rue des Petits Carmes 24A
1000 Brussels - BELGIUM

POSTAL ADDRESS

Rue des Petits Carmes 15
1000 Brussels - BELGIUM

CONTACT

 +32 (0) 2 223 41 14

 info@egmontinstitute.be (<mailto:info@egmontinstitute.be>)

