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Political Violence in Gabon

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Brittany T. Gregerson

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Executive Summary

- After years of incremental negotiations and co-optation of opposition leaders by former President Omar Bongo, Gabon adopted multiparty elections in the 1990s; ultimately, however, democratic gains were a façade as the country made no substantive changes or improvements in terms of civil liberties or political rights. For all intents and purposes, democracy has stalled in Gabon.
- Since the death of Omar Bongo in 2009, Gabonese domestic groups have been engaging in sporadic protests and riots against the successor regime of Bongo's son, Ali Bongo Ondimba.
- On the surface, the current political environment seems to mirror that of the early 1990s in terms of demands for democratic reforms and the multitude of domestic groups that have been attempting to engage the state. Unlike his father, however, Ali Bongo is operating from a position of relative political weakness and seems unlikely to make many concessions to the opposition. In fact, due to some key differences between the 1990s and now, Ali Bongo may be more predisposed to respond to opposition demands with repression and violence.
- Gabon may be undergoing a period of prolonged social dislocation resulting in a low-grade conflict, but it will likely result in few, if any, substantive changes. Another serious economic contraction or severe drop in the price of oil could, however, alter this forecast.



INSTITUTE FOR DEFENSE ANALYSES

**GLOBAL COVERAGE ANALYSES PROGRAM – AFRICA
ELECTIONS, REGIME SUCCESSION, AND GOVERNANCE**



PREDICTING VIOLENCE IN “RE-EMERGING” DEMOCRACIES

POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN GABON

STEPHANIE M. BURCHARD, PROJECT LEAD

BRITTANY T. GREGERSON

OCTOBER 23, 2012

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Political Violence in Gabon

Research shows that new democracies are inherently more violent than more established democracies.¹ But what happens when democratic starts are punctuated by coups d'état or fail to take hold, restarting multiple times? Do these democratic “restarts” exhibit similar levels of political violence? This case study examines this history of political violence in Gabon and its relationship to democratization in order to assess the potential for instability and the likelihood of the country's future democratic development.

Gabon is one of sub-Saharan Africa's major oil exporting countries. Despite, or possibly due to, the long-term autocratic leadership of former president Omar Bongo, Gabon has exhibited considerably more political stability and regime longevity than its neighbors in Central Africa. One of Africa's six largest oil producers,² Gabon has experienced long periods of economic growth and relative political stability since independence from France in 1960. The major exception was a period in the late 1980s in which the drop in oil prices led to significant economic contraction (GDP growth was estimated to have decreased by 15 percent in 1987). What followed was a prolonged period of political tumult, resulting in the country's first democratic opening in the early 1990s. Despite the adoption of multiparty elections in 1990, Gabon's long-serving president Omar Bongo (1967 to 2009) was able to adjust to the new political institutions and consolidate power, remaining in office until his death in 2009.

After the death of Omar Bongo, his son Ali Bongo Ondimba won a closely contested and controversial presidential election in July 2009. Since Ali Bongo's assumption of the presidency, periodic protests and riots have occurred. It seems another period of instability has taken hold, mirroring the events of the late 1980s and early 1990s as opposition leaders are demanding inclusion in the current government and a national dialogue on democratization. By comparing these two periods in Gabonese history, IDA is able to assess the role political violence has played in the period prior to and after a democratic opening. While there are many commonalities, there are a few key differences between these two periods that suggest Gabon may be heading toward a period of prolonged domestic conflict, but little substantive change in leadership or regime type is likely. This prognosis, based in part on the robustness of the Gabonese petro-state's economy, is tentative as a major exogenous shock to the economy could provide sufficient opportunity and motivation for Gabonese opposition to topple a politically weak president.



Source: Nations Online

Political Violence and Gabon's First Attempt at Democracy (1980s/1990s)

The late 1980s and early 1990s in Gabon were tumultuous with frequent strikes, riots, and protests in the capital, Libreville, and the country's second largest city, Port-Gentil. In the mid-1980s, as a result of a significant decrease in oil prices and an economy almost wholly dependent on oil, the Gabonese economy shrank considerably. (See Appendix A for yearly data on GDP growth rates in Gabon.) Students, teachers, hospital workers, and the army at one point all went on strike in 1989 and 1990.³ President Omar Bongo had held office since 1967 as head of the only legal political party, the Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG). (See Appendix B for a Timeline of Key Political Events in Gabon; see Appendix C for a brief Historical Background on Gabon.) He came under increasing pressure from domestic groups to reform the Gabonese government or step down. Initially, Bongo made a few small gestures, such as allowing exiled opposition leaders Paul Mba Abessolé and Parfait Anotho Edowisa to return from Paris and participate in PDG party politics, in an attempt to assuage Gabonese citizens.⁴ He seemed reluctant, however, to formally entertain opposition groups demanding political reform. The opposition, nevertheless, continued to demand participation in government, perhaps emboldened by the successes of opposition and reformist groups in greater West Africa, and riots and protests continued.

In 1989, two coup plots were uncovered.⁵ Pierre Mamboundou, president of the opposition group the Union of Gabonese People, was accused in one plot and exiled to Senegal.⁶ The suspicious death of opposition leader Joseph Rendjambe – he was found with needle marks in a local Libreville hotel – led to further protests and clashes with government forces.⁷ It is believed that Rendjambe was the target of political assassination due to the popular support he had in Gabon and the possibility that he could command sufficient electoral support to present a serious challenge to Bongo's rule.⁸ Protesters burned public buildings in Libreville and Port-Gentil, accusing Bongo in the death of Rendjambe and demanding democratic reforms.⁹

Gabon seemed poised to join continental neighbors such as Benin, Togo, and Zambia, which, as a result of intense pressures from various domestic groups, had acceded to demands for democratic reforms. Bongo, in a conciliatory gesture, legalized political parties and called for parliamentary elections to be held in September as part of a transition to democratic rule. Protests continued, however, until French troops were dispatched to Libreville in June.¹⁰

The first round of parliamentary elections occurred on September 16, 1990, but voters, alleging massive fraud and vote rigging, attacked polling officials, which led to the postponement of the second round until later in October.¹¹ The PDG won a slight majority of seats (63 out of 120), and Omar Bongo retained power. As a part of Gabon's managed democratic transition, in 1991, a new constitution was promulgated that formalized multiparty elections and the separate, direct election of a president. The original mandate of the current president, Omar Bongo, was allowed to continue until 1993 when the country's first direct presidential election was to be held.

Presidential elections were held in December 1993. Bongo won with 51 percent of the vote amid significant voting irregularities.¹² Official results of the election were published before all provincial votes had been turned in, causing further protests.¹³ Various opposition groups threatened large-scale violence.¹⁴ Paul Mba Abessolé formed a shadow government.¹⁵ Political tensions remained heightened. Faced with no other recourse, Bongo resumed negotiating with the opposition. Negotiations took place in 1993 and 1994 until the Paris Accords were signed in September. The Paris Accords established a government of national unity and incorporated many of the key opposition figures in a new Gabonese government. Omar Bongo was to remain president.

To contextualize protests in Gabon in the early 1990s, it is important to note that they were a part of a larger reform movement that was occurring across sub-Saharan Africa wherein loose groupings of students, workers, and opposition groups banded together to demand inclusion and democratic reforms.¹⁶ Writing in 1992, Bratton and van de Walle argued that the process that was occurring across Africa was dynamic, the result of reiterative negotiations, and that autocratic governments were liberalizing (but not necessarily democratizing) in response to mounting and repeated domestic pressures.¹⁷ Bongo specifically responded first with political repression and political assassinations, superficial concessions for multiparty elections in which no real transfer of power was intended to be allowed, and finally, after repeated and prolonged calls for change, a slight liberalization of the political space.

Omar Bongo's Concessions and Consolidation of Power

Bongo, negotiating from a position of power as the long-time leader of Gabon and with the resources of the state and its military behind him (in addition to his impressive personal fortune), made some concessions but, ultimately, retained power through a process of stalling and co-optation of the opposition. Gabon's "democratic transition," which lasted from 1990 until 1996, resulted in a government of national unity, headed by Omar Bongo. While a large part of the explanation for Bongo's ability to maintain power lies with his political strategizing and maneuvering, another part has to do with the state of the Gabonese economy and the resources at Bongo's disposal. The Gabonese economy contracted sharply in the early 1980s – contributing to striking workers and student

protests and giving the opposition a slight opening in the political space – but the economy recovered fully. GDP growth during the 1990s averaged 2.5 percent. Also, in comparison to most other African countries, Gabon’s economy was robust and Gabonese enjoyed a higher standard of living and higher income per capita than virtually all other countries in Africa (See Appendix A).

After years of incremental negotiations and co-optation of opposition leaders by President Omar Bongo, Gabon adopted multiparty elections and incorporated members of the opposition into government but ultimately made no substantive changes or improvements in terms of the country’s civil liberties or political rights. Table 1 tracks changes in Freedom House scores for Gabon from 1973 to 2012. The period in the late 1980s and 1990s leading up to the negotiations between the opposition and President Bongo’s regime saw a slight improvement in freedom in Gabon; however, after initial concessions were made, the period between 1992 and 2004 saw freedoms erode and progress stall out.

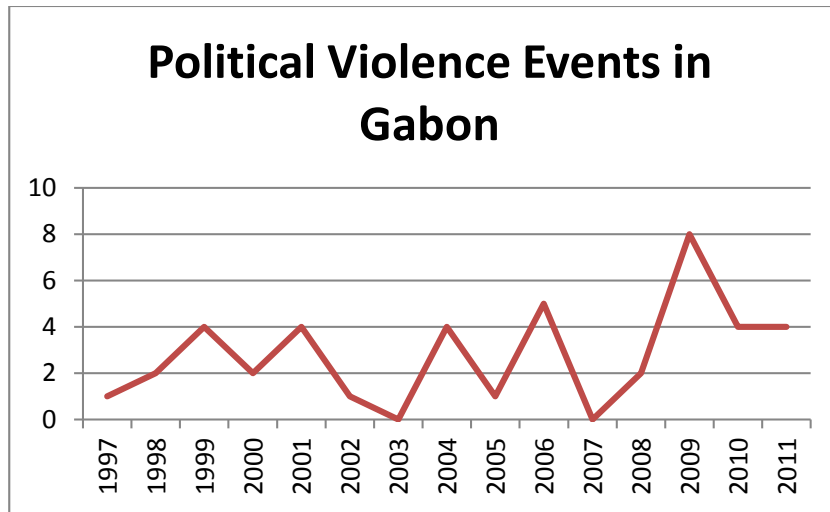
Table 1. Freedom, Civil Rights, and Political Rights in Gabon, 1972 to Present

Years	Freedom House Score	Civil Rights	Political Liberties	Change from Previous Time Period
1972-1987	6	6	6	—
1988	5.5	5	6	Slight improvement
1989	4	4	4	Improvement
1990	3.5	3	4	Slight improvement
1991	4	4	4	Slight deterioration
1992-2004	4.5	4	5	Slight deterioration
2005-2008	5	4	6	Slight deterioration
2009-present	5.5	5	6	Slight deterioration

Source: Freedom House Scores range from 1 to 7 where 1 is the most free and 7 is the least free.

The Paris Accords were agreed to in 1994 and placed to the citizens of Gabon in 1995 as a referendum. The referendum was overwhelmingly approved by 96 percent of the voting population.¹⁸ Although the institutional reforms laid out in Paris Accords did take place, there was some evidence of further stalling by the government (i.e., level of representation of the opposition in cabinet and timing of local and parliamentary elections did not follow as promised).¹⁹ Nonetheless, political violence in the form of riots and protests abated. Elections were held again in 1996, 1998, and 2001. Fraud was alleged in all three contests, and yet President Bongo remained firmly entrenched in power. Prior to the 2005 presidential election, the constitution was changed to remove presidential term limits (agreed to as part of the Paris Accords) and allow Bongo to run for president again – his sixth time standing for direct election. He won with 79 percent of the vote. Fraud was alleged, and protests and riots ensued but nowhere near the level experienced in the 1980s and 1990s.²⁰

During the early 1990s, riots and protests were a frequent occurrence. Figure 1 tracks political violence events (riots and protests) during the period after Gabon’s first democratic opening, between 1997 and 2011. The data come from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset.²¹ By 1997, political violence in most forms had tapered off. Only one event was recorded that year; it was between two groups, both of which had supported President Bongo. Scattered student protests and worker strikes took place in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but no sustained protest movement ensued. In 2009, however, eight riots and protests – all of which were related to Omar Bongo’s death and the issue of political succession – occurred.



Source: ACLED

Figure 1. Political Violence in Gabon, 1997 to 2011

Second Opening?

As president of Gabon, Omar Bongo – who died in office on June 8, 2009 – had amassed a fortune. His estimated worth at the time of his death was unknown, but some alleged he was among the world’s richest men.²² After his death, a brief succession crisis occurred concerning who would take his place. His son Ali Bongo Ondimba announced he would contest the 2009 presidential elections on behalf of the PDG; however, some senior members of the PDG protested this move. Then-party leader and Prime Minister Jean Eyeghe Ndong resigned.²³ André Mba Obame, a member of opposition in the 1980s before joining the PDG, announced he would run for president as an independent candidate. Obame, who had served in several cabinet positions under Omar Bongo, including Minister of Interior, believed that he was the rightful heir to the presidency and as much a “son” to Omar Bongo as Ali Bongo.²⁴

Ali Bongo, former foreign minister and defense minister under his father, won the August 30 election with a plurality of the vote (42 percent); André Mba Obame came in

second with 25.8 percent of the vote, and Pierre Mamboundou was third with 25.2 percent of the vote. Bongo's campaign slogan was "peace, development, and sharing."²⁵

After the election, looting and rioting ensued and escalated to alarming levels. Alleging fraud and a stolen election, opposition supporters set the French consulate in Port-Gentil on fire.²⁶ The Gabonese state threatened to impose a "state of siege" if protests continued.²⁷ Several of the main opposition candidates filed a petition with the Supreme Court to overturn the results, alleging massive fraud and vote rigging.²⁸ The Supreme Court upheld the elections results in October.²⁹

In January 2011, almost a year and a half after the election, opposition presidential candidate André Mba Obame declared himself the winner of the 2009 election and the legitimate president of Gabon.³⁰ He appointed his own cabinet and sought refuge at the UN headquarters in Libreville.³¹ He claimed to be inspired by revolutionary events that were occurring at the time in Tunisia and Côte d'Ivoire.³² Hundreds of protesters gathered in support of Obame.³³ Obame's political party, the National Union, was dissolved by the government in February. Obame then fled to France.

In July 2011, the other major opposition leader who contested the 2009 presidency, Pierre Mamboundou of the Union of Gabonese People (UPG), stated that he and his party were in talks with Ali Bongo to enter into a power sharing agreement ahead of the 2011 parliamentary elections.³⁴ Mamboundou, the UPG presidential candidate in 1998, 2005, and 2009, died suddenly in October 2011 at the age of 65.³⁵ The December 2011 parliamentary elections took place as scheduled, with the vast majority of opposition parties refusing to participate. As a result, the PDG and its handful of allies won 112 out of 120 possible seats. The opposition claimed the election results had "no validity."³⁶

After a 14-month absence in France where he was reportedly convalescing as the result of an undisclosed illness, Obame returned to Gabon in August 2012.³⁷ Clashes with police broke out shortly thereafter. They were characterized as the most violent protests in Gabon since the post-election riots of 2009.³⁸ An opposition television station was attacked in September.³⁹ Also in September, a coalition of approximately 20 parties issued a joint statement calling for democratic dialogue with Ali Bongo. He has denied their request stating that it is in no way necessary and that he will not talk to people who "do not respect their own country's institutions ... and leaders."⁴⁰ There have been recent accusations that the government is hiring foreign mercenaries in an attempt to eliminate/assassinate opposition leaders.⁴¹ These events have led some commentators to conclude that the opposition in Gabon has "returned" and poses a serious threat to the government of Ali Bongo.⁴²

Comparing Democratic Openings: the 1990s versus Present-day Gabon

While protests and riots occurred frequently, Omar Bongo’s strategy of stalling and co-optation provided him with sufficient time so that no meaningful changes needed to take place and no challenges to his leadership were sustained. Political violence diminished after the Paris Accords. The protests of the 1990s in Gabon, ultimately, led to very few democratic gains in the long run.

How do the events of the 1990s compare to the current state of affairs in Gabon? Is the current situation sufficiently different that a different outcome could take place? While the current level of conflict is comparable with the earlier period, there are some differences that suggest another possible course of events. Table 2 compares the conditions found in Gabon in the 1990s to the country’s current state of affairs. Two categories of conditions are examined: those that affect the motivations for political violence and those that affect the opportunity for or response to political violence.

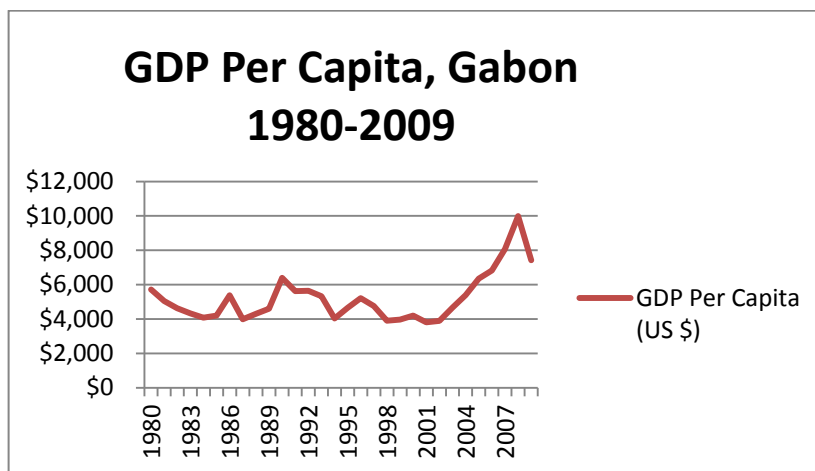
Table 2. Freedom, Civil Rights, and Political Rights in Gabon, 1972 to Present

Conditions	1990s/First Attempt at Democracy	2010s/Second Attempt at Democracy	Significant Difference?
Motivation: State of Economy	Strong (with the exception of 1986)	Strong	No
Motivation: Human Development Index	Medium	Medium	No
Motivation: Regional Inspiration	Strong	Weak	Yes
Opportunity/Response: Executive Strength (Institutional)	Strong	Strong	No
Opportunity/Response: Executive Strength (longevity, political support)	Strong	Weak?	Yes
Opportunity/Response: Strength and Organization of Political Opposition	Weak	Weak	No
Opportunity/Response: Media Freedoms	Limited	Limited	No
Opportunity/Response: Civil Liberties	Weak	Weak	No
Opportunity/Response: Relations with France	Strong	Weak	Yes

Other factors that researchers argue affect the likelihood of political violence (major social cleavage such as ethnicity, language, or religion) can be held constant across time in Gabon since these are not factors that change within a given country, at least not quickly enough to register for the purpose of this analysis. The Fang, for instance, are the largest ethnic group in Gabon – comprising approximately 30 percent of the population – but because of the multitude of other groups (more than 40), ethnicity has never been a major cleavage in Gabonese politics or society. From time to time there are antagonisms between Fang and a generalized non-Fang group, but there has been no sustained cleavage mobilized along ethnic lines. The mere possibility of ethnic strife, however, has

been used more than once by politicians to defend autocratic regimes and Gabon's lack of democratic development.⁴³

In terms of motivation, the state of the Gabonese economy has been consistently strong (see Appendix A) over time with the major exception of the economic contraction of 1987 that was due in large part to a sharp decline in oil prices. Figure 2 graphs GDP per capita in Gabon over time. GDP per capita is much higher in Gabon (averaging \$4,629, \$4,953, and \$6,064 in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, respectively) than in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa where GDP per capita averages between \$1,000 and \$2,000 during the same time period.⁴⁴ The overall level of development in Gabon – based on the Human Development Index, which examines health, education, and living standards – has steadily increased since the 1980s, but has always ranged in the middle of comparative country rankings, and far outperforms the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.⁴⁵ The only factor that could conceivably affect motivation for political violence is “Regional Inspiration” because the decade of the 1990s was a period of rapid change across Africa with most countries adopting elections as a means of leadership selection. Although many have tried to link the Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East to events in sub-Saharan Africa, there is at this time no such regional or continent-wide phenomenon currently taking place that would provide a similar successful model or impetus for drastic change of the sort that took place in the 1990s.



Source: International Monetary Fund

Figure 2. Economic Growth in Gabon

Turning to opportunity for political response and the capacity to respond, many of the same conditions are found in both the 1990s and the current sociopolitical environment in Gabon. The formal powers of the executive are the same: strong then and strong now. Despite elections and the promulgation of a new constitution, Gabon still has an extremely powerful executive, sometimes referred to as hyper-presidentialism. The opposition now, much like then, is fragmented, weakly organized, and lacking a message beyond generalized anti-regime sentiments. For example, in the 1996

parliamentary election, 12 parties and a group of independent candidates all won representation in the National Assembly.⁴⁶ In the 1998 presidential elections, seven candidates ran against Omar Bongo, splitting 33 percent of the vote among themselves compared to his 67 percent. The 2009 presidential election, while highly contested, saw 17 presidential candidates run against Ali Bongo. Even though Bongo received only a plurality of the vote (42 percent), the remaining 58 percent was split among these 17 candidates.⁴⁷ While there are serious doubts about the integrity of all of these elections, the fact that so many candidates and parties contested these elections is evidence in and of itself of a lack of opposition organization. Their inability to coalesce behind one candidate speaks volumes about the opposition's ability to organize a coherent and meaningful challenge to Bongo rule. The Gabonese press was severely restricted in the 1990s and continues to face intimidation and harassment; thus, little change in this condition is readily apparent.⁴⁸ Finally, according to Freedom House, civil liberties in Gabon have undergone no significant change since the 1990s (see Table 1).

There are two conditions that have changed substantially between the 1990s and present day: the political support for the executive and Gabon's relationship with France. Ali Bongo, son of Omar Bongo, has held presidential office since 2009. His selection by the PDG to run for president and his subsequent election were both highly contentious. The fact that high-level defections occurred within the PDG speak to Ali Bongo's lack of internal partisan support. Shortly after the disputed election, Bongo had high-ranking General Jean-Philippe Ntumpa Lebani and several lower-ranked officers arrested, accusing them of supporting Obama and former prime minister Ndong.⁴⁹ Since his tenure in office is only three years old at this time (compared to 20 years at the time his father was faced with significant opposition demands), he seems unlikely to make many concessions to the opposition. In recent interviews, he has explicitly said that he would not engage demonstrators and, specifically, Obama in any sort of negotiation.⁵⁰ He has implied that negotiating with Obama would be undemocratic since the voters have already had their say in leadership and governance in Gabon through the 2009 election.⁵¹ In mid-September, Ali Bongo called an extraordinary session of Parliament to declare in no uncertain terms that he would not negotiate with the opposition he claims is attempting to orchestrate a "constitutional coup."⁵²

Further complicating the situation, relations with France have deteriorated. Whereas Omar Bongo was once considered a key actor in "Françafrique," the notoriously special relationship France had with her former colonies,⁵³ Ali Bongo enjoys no such relationship or backing. His family is currently under investigation for its property and holdings in France.⁵⁴ Amid these allegations, Gabon (like Rwanda in 2009) has adopted English as its official language and dropped French.⁵⁵ The implications of this act are significant. Taken together – a politically insecure president lacking historically close external support – reinforces the likelihood of a heavy-handed response by the

government over a negotiated settlement to current domestic unrest. These two conditions suggest that political violence in Gabon is poised to escalate. However, given the lack of motivation for a widespread opposition, it remains unlikely that Ali Bongo will undergo any serious challenge to his government or regime in the near future. It is also unlikely with Ali Bongo in power that Gabon will make any serious progress towards democratic development; democracy in Gabon has stalled once again.

Conclusions

Since the death of Omar Bongo in 2009, Gabonese opposition groups have been engaging in sporadic protests and riots against the successor regime of Bongo's son Ali Bongo Ondimba. On the surface, the current political environment might seem to mirror that of the early 1990s in terms of demands for democratic reforms and the number/types of domestic groups that have been attempting to engage the state. Unlike his father, however, Ali Bongo is operating from a position of relative political weakness since he has not yet consolidated his nascent rule. He seems unlikely to make many concessions to the opposition in the near future. It does seem, however, that the son is taking some lessons from his father's style of leadership: he has made overtures to co-opt some members of the opposition, as was the case with Pierre Mamboundou before his sudden death in 2011. When Omar Bongo finally decided it was necessary to engage in serious negotiations with the opposition, he was able to drag out the negotiations over the course of several years, consolidating his power further in the process while attempting to co-opt key members of the opposition. Ali Bongo might adopt a similar strategy. While Gabon may be currently undergoing a period of prolonged social conflict – barring another serious economic contraction or severe drop in the price of oil – it is unlikely that these conflicts will result in any substantive changes. The only caveat being a significant exogenous shock, such as a precipitous drop in oil prices, could change this forecast.

To summarize, the relationship between political violence and democratic development in Gabon has not resulted in substantial gains in terms of political freedoms or civil liberties. Political violence in the 1990s led to a period of negotiation that forced Omar Bongo to strategize how to best stay in power. He used a mixed strategy of repression and intimidation, minimal concessions drawn out over an extended period of time, patronage and co-optation of the opposition. Political violence has again been employed by the opposition as a means of forcing Gabon's autocratic government to negotiate for an expansion of freedoms, but as of now, it seems unlikely to affect meaningful change. Unlike, new democracies in which violence is a result of political competition and immature political institutions, competition in Gabon is restricted and its political institutions, while ineffective, are not immature. Causation is, in this case, reversed – political violence causing small democratic apertures and not the other way around.

Appendix A

Gabonese Economy, 1980 to 2009

Year	GDP Growth	GDP Per Capita (US \$)	Year	GDP Growth	GDP Per Capita (US \$)	Year	GDP Growth	GDP Per Capita (US \$)
1980	NA	\$5722	1990	5.1	\$6400	2000	-1.8	\$4204
1981	-4	\$5048	1991	6.1	\$5628	2001	2.1	\$3814
1982	4.1	\$4630	1992	-3.1	\$5648	2002	-0.3	\$3894
1983	2	\$4337	1993	3.9	\$5331	2003	2.5	\$4664
1984	4.9	\$4081	1994	3.7	\$4032	2004	1.35	\$5395
1985	5.8	\$4205	1995	4.9	\$4654	2005	3.0	\$6354
1986	-2.1	\$5385	1996	3.6	\$5214	2006	1.2	\$6829
1987	-15.4	\$3987	1997	5.7	\$4759	2007	5.5	\$8075
1988	3.5	\$4301	1998	3.5	\$3907	2008	2.3	\$9994
1989	15.4	\$4600	1999	-8.9	\$3965	2009	-1.4	\$7420
<i>Average</i>	<i>1.6</i>	<i>\$4629</i>		<i>2.5</i>	<i>\$4953</i>		<i>1.4</i>	<i>\$6064</i>

Source: International Monetary Fund

Appendix B

Timeline of Key Political Events, Gabon

1910	Incorporated into French Equatorial Africa
1958	Votes for autonomy within French community; denied by France
1960	Granted independence
1961	First independent elections; presidential and parliamentary; Leon Mba elected president
1964	Coup; France intervenes and re-installs Mba; new parliamentary elections held in April
1967	Elections held in March; Mba dies in November; Albert-Bernard Bongo becomes president
1968	Bongo declares Gabon a one party state with himself as head of Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG), formerly known as the Gabonese Democratic Bloc (BDG)
1973	Single party elections (president and parliament); Bongo converts to Islam and changes first name to Omar from Albert-Bernard
1979	Single party elections (president)
1980	Single party elections (parliament)
1985	Single party elections (parliament)
1986	Single party elections (president)
1990	Opposition parties legalized; elections held in Sept; electoral violence occurred leading suspension of 2 nd round and the holding of fresh elections in 32 constituencies in Oct; 2 coup attempts uncovered; protests following death of an opposition leader;
1991	New constitution
1993	Presidential elections held; Bongo wins with 51% of the vote; fraud allegations; “serious civil disturbances,” in 1993 and 1994
1994	Paris Accords agreed to by Bongo and opposition
1995	Referendum vote on Paris Accords, 96.3% in favor
1996	PDG wins majority in parliamentary elections, 70.8%

1998	Bongo wins re-election (66.8%); fraud;
2001	Parliamentary elections; PDG 71.6%; boycott
2003	Constitution changed to remove presidential term limits
2005	Bongo re-elected (79%); fraud; opposition protesters clash with police
2006	PDG (& allies) win 82.5% of seats in parliament; fraud alleged
2008	Omar Bongo bans 20 NGOs
2009	Bongo dies (June); Ali Ben Bongo wins election in Aug (41.7%); fraud; protests (“unprecedented levels of violence”); opposition leaders go into hiding (Andre Mba Obame included); repression
2010	Major strike in oil industry (April);
2011	Mba Obame declares himself winner of 2009 presidential election, establishes parallel government then flees country; UN dissolved by government; protests; pol viol; PDG wins 93% (112/120) of seats, 34% turnout
2012 (through September)	Repression, violence, protests, return of Mba Obame, imprisonments; no concessions by Ali Bongo yet
2015/16	Parliamentary/Presidential elections scheduled to be held

Appendix C

Historical Background on Gabon

Gabon is a small, relatively wealthy country in Central Africa. With a population of approximately 1.5 million and an estimated GDP of \$17.05 billion, per capita income is high for African standards (\$8,000), although poverty is still a major problem.⁵⁶ Oil was first discovered in Gabon in the 1960s with notable discoveries taking place in 1980s.⁵⁷ Slightly more than half (51 percent) of government revenues are derived from oil exports.⁵⁸ It is estimated that Gabon's reserves, if production were to hold constant, will last the country another 41.2 years.⁵⁹ Timber/forestry is also a very important industry in Gabon and, prior to the discovery of oil, was the most important industry in Gabon.⁶⁰

Formerly a part of French Equatorial Africa – a colonial federation that included present-day Congo-Brazzaville, Cameroon, Central African Republic, and Chad – Gabon was granted independence from France in 1960. Unlike some other colonial possessions in Africa (Algeria, for example), there was very little history of violence or revolt in colonial Gabon, and the process of decolonization was peaceful. Prior to independence, Gabon held elections to various quasi-representative bodies such as territorial assemblies and mayoral offices within Gabon. The Gabonese political elite at the time of independence were generally educated in France and had served in some fashion in these representative bodies.⁶¹ Léon Mba, a part of this small cadre of French-trained Gabonese political elite, was elected Gabon's president in 1961 as head of the Gabonese Democratic Bloc (BDG). Mba was reportedly the preferred candidate of France.⁶²

Given the chaos and instability in its neighborhood, Gabon is often referred to as one of the more stable countries in Central Africa, but *stability* in this context should not be confused with *peace* in that Gabon has a significant history of attempted coups, opposition intimidation and imprisonment, and political assassinations. In 1964, the Gabonese military attempted to overthrow Léon Mba. He was held captive for approximately two days until French troops intervened and reinstalled him as president.⁶³ Jean-Hilaire Aubame, one of Mba's chief political rivals, was held responsible and sentenced to 10 years in prison. It is reported that Mba lived out the remainder of his years in fear and isolation while the French were grooming his successor, Albert-Bernard Bongo.⁶⁴ In 1967, while Mba was dying of cancer, Bongo was appointed vice president. In an election that is widely believed to have been staged by the French, Mba (who ran unopposed) was reelected president in March 1967.⁶⁵ He died in November, and Vice President Bongo took over the presidency.

Bongo, of the Téké ethnic group in south eastern Gabon, had previously served in the French Army Air Corps and was well trusted by the French.⁶⁶ In an effort to promote national unity, he released Aubame shortly after assuming the presidency and granted amnesty to other coup plotters. In 1968, he eliminated all rival political parties and established single party rule under the Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG), again in the name of national unity. In 1973, Albert-Bernard Bongo converted to Islam and changed his name to Omar. Omar Bongo oversaw single party elections in 1973, 1979, 1980, 1985, and 1986, which all saw the PDG and him, as its leader, returned to office. Official government estimates put voter turnout at anywhere between 96 percent and 108 percent during this time period.⁶⁷

Bolstered by revenues from Gabon's oil exports during the oil boom of the 1970s, Bongo established a patronage network through a larger-than-necessary bureaucracy while simultaneously targeting political opponents with intimidation and, in extreme cases, assassination. The presidential guard was rumored to be 1,500 strong, excessive for a country with a population of just over 1 million.⁶⁸ Bongo Germain Mba, a Gabonese diplomat and political rival of Omar Bongo, disappeared in Libreville in 1971. He was reportedly murdered and his body disposed of on the orders of President Bongo.⁶⁹ Paul Mba Abessolé, a leading opposition figure in the 1970s, was forced into exile in France in 1976. In 1981, domestic opposition organized and called for an end to Bongo and the PDG's single-party rule.⁷⁰ The group held a small protest at a bus station. Its leaders were promptly arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment.⁷¹ Thus, while there is continuity in Bongo's leadership during this period and no interstate or intrastate war broke out – all of which are signs of political stability – Gabon experienced significant levels of political repression and political violence targeted at the country's political elite.

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