

## ↓ Gabon

**Population:** 1,400,000

**Capital:** Libreville

**Political Rights:** 6

**Civil Liberties:** 4

**Status:** Partly Free

**Trend Arrow:** Gabon received a downward trend arrow due to the authorities' crackdown on nongovernmental organizations and the harassment of civil society leaders.

### Ten-Year Ratings Timeline For Year Under Review

(Political Rights, Civil Liberties, Status)

Year Under Review	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Rating	5,4,PF	5,4,PF	5,4,PF	5,4,PF	5,4,PF	5,4,PF	6,4,PF	6,4,PF	6,4,PF	6,4,PF

### Overview:

Two cabinet shuffles took place during 2008, following the appointment of a new government in December 2007. President Omar Bongo's Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG) won a landslide in the April 2008 local elections, and the ninth PDG party congress was held in September. Civil liberties in Gabon suffered setbacks on a number of fronts over the course of the year, as the authorities mounted a harsh response to criticism from nongovernmental organizations.

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Gabon gained independence from France in 1960. President Omar Bongo took power in 1967, and the country became a one-party state. In 1990, protests prompted by economic hardship led to multiparty legislative elections, but Bongo retained power in a rigged 1993 presidential vote.

The 1996 parliamentary elections were also flawed. Following opposition gains in local elections, the government transferred key electoral functions from the electoral commission to the Interior Ministry. Bongo won reelection in 1998 in a vote marked by serious irregularities.

Opposition boycotts and government interference helped assure victory for the ruling Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG) in the 2001 legislative elections. In the 2003 senatorial elections, municipal and regional officials elected 91 senators, all from the PDG, to six-year terms amid further irregularities. Opposition leaders and independent experts in 2005 accused the government of inflating the census figures to falsify the voter registry and qualify for increased aid.

The 2005 presidential election occurred over two days, with security forces voting on November 25 and the public on November 27. The opposition argued that the arrangement had increased opportunities for fraud. Though peaceful, the election was marred by inaccurate voter lists, the abuse of state resources, and falsified turnout figures. Official results granted Bongo victory, with Pierre Mamboundou of the Union for Gabonese People (UPG) and former cabinet

minister Zacharie Myboto placing second and third, respectively. Mamboundou challenged the results, and police forcibly dispersed protests by his supporters.

In 2006, the government reached an agreement with opposition parties to establish a permanent national electoral commission in time for the 2007 local elections, which were later postponed to 2008 due in part to delays in updating the voter rolls. Legislative elections were held in 2006, with the PDG and allied parties taking 97 of 120 National Assembly seats. The elections were judged credible, and an improvement over the flawed 2005 presidential contest.

In April 2008, local elections went ahead with low voter turnout. The PDG won 1,120 council seats out of a total of 1,990. Myboto's Union for Democracy and Development (UGDD) did well, winning 160 seats, while Mamboundou's UPG lost support. The following month, the councilors elected mayors. The PDG managed to win control of eight out of nine provincial capitals after allying with both pro-presidential and opposition parties. Senate elections are due in 2009.

In late 2007, Bongo appointed a new government. He carried out two further cabinet shuffles in February and October 2008, resulting in the addition of three new delegate ministers. The president's closest allies—including his son, the defense minister—retained key portfolios, and Jean Eyeghe Ndong remained prime minister. The PDG's ninth party congress took place in September 2008 and resulted in a new secretary-general, Faustin Boukoubi, the minister of agriculture, fishing, and forestry. The congress focused on party discipline and revived the party's political bureau.

Gabon relies in part on a small force of French soldiers to prevent domestic or external threats to the regime. In July 2008, Libreville international airport police discovered 27 assault rifles on an arriving international flight.

Four decades of corrupt, autocratic rule have made Bongo one of the world's richest men. Some revenues from oil production have reached the population and contributed to higher education standards, but reserves are dwindling, and the state depends on oil income for about 60 percent of its revenue. The need to diversify the economy helped motivate a structural adjustment program with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2005. In 2008, the IMF concluded the program and noted that fiscal performance was weaker than anticipated. In February 2008, Gabon completed the early repayment of 86 percent of its debt to the Paris Club of international creditors. In May, the Belinga mining project, which was opposed by environmentalist groups, was set in motion after the China National Machinery and Equipment Import and Export Company (CMEC) signed a mining convention with the government.

In August 2008, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea announced their intention to refer their border dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The countries were vying for control of three small islands with potential oil resources in the Gulf of Guinea. In September 2008, the UN secretary-general appointed a special adviser for the dispute.

### **Political Rights and Civil Liberties:**

Gabon is not an electoral democracy. However, international observers reported that the December 2006 legislative elections were an improvement over past elections. The April 2008 local elections were generally peaceful, but low voter turnout indicated widespread public apathy with the political process; President Bongo has retained power for over 40 years. The president is elected for seven-year terms, and a 2003 constitutional change removed term limits on the presidency. The president has extensive powers, including the authority to dissolve the

parliament. The bicameral legislature consists of a 91-seat Senate and a 120-seat National Assembly. Regional and municipal government officials elect senators for six-year terms. National Assembly members are elected by popular vote to serve five-year terms.

Freedom to form and join political parties is generally respected, but civil servants face harassment and discrimination if they affiliate with opposition groups. The PDG has held power continuously since 1968. Of some 50 other registered parties, 40 are part of the ruling PDG-led coalition, the Union for the Gabonese Presidential Majority (UMPG). In early 2008, the Constitutional Court temporarily suspended voter registration to examine complaints made by opposition parties, but in September it rejected most complaints on procedural grounds. The Court also confirmed the results of the April local elections.

Corruption is widespread. In 2007, a French judge found President Omar Bongo guilty of accepting a bribe to free a French citizen from jail in 1996. The National Commission Against Illicit Enrichment (CNLCEI) was established in 2003 but has yet to issue a report or take any major action. The CNLCEI is expected to address a complaint brought forward in July 2008 by three leaders from Gabonese civil society about Gabon's chief prosecutor and Bongo's relative, Bosco Fall Alaba, after his personal bank records were leaked.

Rampant graft prevents significant oil, mining, and logging revenues from reaching the impoverished majority of the population; Gabon ranked 119 out of 177 countries surveyed in the UN Development Programme's 2007/2008 Human Development Index. Separately, Gabon ranked 96 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Press freedom is guaranteed in law but restricted in practice. State censorship of the press continues, with publications printed outside of the country subject to review before distribution. In 2007, the National Council for Communication (CNC) banned two publications: the Paris-based, pan-African bimonthly *Le Gri-Gri* and the bimonthly *La Nation*. *La Nation* was banned for a month while *Le Gri-Gri* was banned until the Paris-based paper received permission from Gabonese authorities to be printed and distributed in Gabon. In October 2008 it suspended two private weeklies, *Le Scribouillard* and *Le Mbandja*, for satirizing government ministers. Journalists practice self-censorship, and the state is authorized to criminalize civil libel suits. The Pan-African News Agency reported in 2007 that 250 trials had been conducted against the media in Gabon since 1990. In December 2008, a journalist of the satirical weekly paper *Le Nganga* was summoned to the presidential palace where he was badly beaten by soldiers. State-controlled outlets dominate the broadcast media, but there are some private broadcasters, and foreign news sources like Radio France Internationale are available. Access to the internet is not restricted by the government.

Religious freedom is enshrined in the constitution and generally upheld by authorities. The government does not restrict academic freedom.

The rights of assembly and association are guaranteed, but not always respected. Due to the lack of strong opposition parties, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) serve as important vehicles for criticism of the government. However, government repression makes it difficult for local human rights groups to operate freely. In January 2008, the interior minister suspended 22 NGOs after they issued a public statement criticizing the government. The suspension was lifted after a week, but in June, a civil society leader was prevented from attending an international meeting on revenue transparency. Additionally, in July, police attempted to arrest members of the Gabonese Civil Society Forum Against Poverty (FOSCPG) on the day after it released a statement denouncing the chief prosecutor's alleged corruption. In December 2008, five civil

society members, including two journalists, were arrested without charge and held in preventive detention without access to legal assistance.

Virtually the entire private-sector workforce is unionized. Collective bargaining is allowed by industry, not by firm. A series of strikes and demonstrations took place in 2008, including strikes by oil workers in March and October, air traffic controllers in May and July, doctors and nurses in August, teachers in October, and market traders in November, as well as general protests over increased living expenses. While these protests were small, the police used force to break up one of the demonstrations over living expenses in April.

The judiciary is not independent. However, rights to legal counsel and a public criminal trial are generally respected. Judges may deliver summary verdicts, and torture is sometimes used to produce confessions. Prison conditions are marked by beatings and insufficient food, water, and medical care. Arbitrary arrest and long periods of pretrial detention are common. The death penalty was abolished in 2007.

Discrimination against African immigrants, including harassment by security forces and arbitrary detention, is a problem. Though equal under the law, most of Gabon's several thousand indigenous Pygmies live in extreme poverty in isolated forest communities without access to government services, and they are often exploited as cheap labor.

While no legal restrictions on travel exist, interference by the authorities occurs regularly. Business conditions remain difficult; Gabon ranked 151 out of 181 countries in the World Bank's 2009 Doing Business survey.

Gabon has been criticized for the exploitation of thousands of child laborers who are sent from other Central or West African countries to work as domestic servants. The government has cooperated with international organizations to fight child trafficking but says it lacks sufficient resources to tackle the problem.

Legal protections for women include equal-access laws for education, business, and investment, but these laws favor educated women in urban areas. Women continue to face legal and cultural discrimination, particularly in rural areas, and domestic violence is reportedly widespread. Children and young adults are also susceptible to ritual killings. There were 12 deaths attributed to ritual killings reported during the campaign period ahead of the April 2008 local elections. Rape is illegal but seldom prosecuted, and abortion is prohibited. Women have no property rights in widely practiced common-law marriages.