



Gabon — Va-PoReg Country Report

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08/01/1886 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of France]: Gabon became part of French Congo on 08/01/1886, which was a French colony comprising the present-day area of the Republic of the Congo, parts of Gabon, and the Central African Republic. Gabon became one of the four territories within French Equatorial Africa (AEF) in 1910, and remained part of this federation continuously until it dissolved in 1958.¹ In World War II, the Free French Forces, backed by British naval and air forces, launched an invasion of Gabon. Their objective was to topple the pro-Vichy France colonial administration and unite French territories in support of the Allied cause.² In the so-called Battle of Gabon, the administration was defeated and surrendered on 11/12/1940.³ According to LIED no multiparty executive and legislative elections were held until 1945, from 1946 onward only multiparty legislative elections were held. However universal male and female suffrage was absent until 1957 (LIED). According to LIED political liberties were absent. V-Dem's PCLI classifies political liberties as absent until 1949 and as not really present from 1950 onward. Both LIED's and V-Dem's data for Gabon only start in 1910. From 1910 to 1945, V-Dem's JCE indicates that judicial constraints on the executive are absent. Simultaneously, V-Dem's LCE shows no value, which, with appropriate caution, can be interpreted as an absence of legislative constraints on the executive. For 1946-1949, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent. From 1950 to 1958, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also limited.

31/03/1957 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of France, Liberal Democracy]/Start Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of France, Liberal Democracy]: On this date, pre-independence elections to the Gabonese Territorial Assembly were held under universal suffrage, after voting inequalities had been removed in the French African Colonies through the loi-cadre (Reform Act) passed in 1956. The Gabonese Democratic Union (UDSG) emerged as the strongest party, winning 14 out of 40 seats, followed by the Gabonese Democratic Bloc (BDG), which won eight seats.⁴

11/28/1958 End Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of France, Liberal Democracy]/Start Electoral Autocracy [semi-sovereign, external affairs under France, Liberal Democracy]: On this date, Gabon became an autonomous republic within the French Community.⁵ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. The elections were not competitive (LIED), not really clean (V-Dem CEI) but in stark contrast to that somewhat free and fair according to V-Dem's EF&FI. Although originally finishing second, the BDG gained a parliamentary majority because of bribes, which led deputies of the UDSG to switch parties. On 05/21/1957 Léon M'ba was appointed vice-president of the government council under the control of the French governor.⁶ After constitutional referendum in September 1958, which had granted the autonomous status, the assembly voted to establish a legislature in December 1958 and then proclaimed the constitution on 02/19/1959. On 02/27/1959 M'ba became Prime Minister. M'ba had previously detained an opposition leader and coerced certain opposition deputies to change their party affiliations. The BDG (Gabonese Democratic Bloc) benefited from gerrymandering and a multimember district, plurality electoral system, securing a robust majority in the June

1960 election (Bernault 1996: 294-97, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014b: 60). For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also limited.

08/17/1960 Continuation Electoral Autocracy [as independent country]: On this date Gabon gained independence, with M'ba, who had previously served as Prime Minister, as president (Fleischhacker 1999b: 387). In 11/1960, he detained eight internal party opponents (Bernault 1996: 294-97, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014b: 60). The dissolution of the National Assembly followed on 11/17/1960. Furthermore, he declared a state of emergency.⁷ Political liberties were absent according to LIED and can be interpreted as not really present according to V-Dem's PCLI since 1958. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive's constraints fell into Intermediate Category 1, between unlimited authority and slight limitations. During this regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also limited. According to LIED multiparty executive and legislative elections were held.

02/12/1961 End Electoral Autocracy/Start One-Party Autocracy: Here's the corrected version: Gabon held its first post-independence elections on this date, simultaneously choosing a president and parliament. The presidential race was uncontested, with Prime Minister Léon M'ba of the Gabonese Democratic Bloc running unopposed and securing victory by default. Similarly, the parliamentary elections featured only one candidate list, jointly presented by the Gabonese Democratic Bloc and the Gabonese Democratic and Social Union under the unified National Union banner.⁸ The newly drafted constitution by the president, provided him with widespread power (Fleischhacker 1999b: 387-388). According to our classification the presidential and parliamentary elections were in this period non-competitive. Hence, our classification is in line with LIED, but not with V-Dem's EF&FI. V-Dem for unknown reasons point into the direction that the elections were at least semi-competitive, while their CEI scores the elections as not really clean. In addition to that, LIED considers political liberties as absent and V-Dem's PCLI as not really present. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive's constraints fell into Intermediate Category 1, between unlimited authority and slight limitations. For 1962-1963, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also limited. For 1964, V-Dem's JCE indicates that judicial constraints on the executive are limited. At the same time, V-Dem's LCE shows no value, which, with appropriate caution, can be interpreted as an absence of legislative constraints on the executive.

02/17/1964 End One-Party Autocracy/Start Non-Electoral Transitional Regime: After M'ba dissolved the legislature, an opposition leader and military officers deposed him and established an interim government that was led by Jean-Hilaire Aubame, who served previously as foreign minister under M'ba.

02/19/1964 End Non-Electoral Transitional Regime/Start One-Party Autocracy: The provisional government was toppled by French paratroopers on 02/19/1964. M'ba was reinstalled as the president and promised "total punishment" against the people involved in the coup. Aubame was sentenced to ten years of hard labor and ten years of exile.⁹

04/12/1964 End One-Party Autocracy/Start Electoral Autocracy: M'ba's party Gabon Democratic Bloc (BDG) gained a majority in the legislative elections on this date, during which M'ba is believed to have bribed voters with banknotes, and which showed serious electoral irregularities. The Gabonese Democratic and Social Union (UDSG) practically disappeared from the political scene, as many of its leaders had been jailed because of the coup and the UDSG was formally outlawed (Lansford 2021: 582).¹⁰ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED categorizes the elections as not competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI and CEI score them as neither free, fair nor clean. Furthermore, LIED's and V-Dem's scores concerning the political liberties stayed the same. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive's constraints fell into Intermediate Category 1,

between unlimited authority and slight limitations. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

03/19/1967 End Electoral Autocracy/Start One-Party Autocracy: In the 1967 general elections, the BDG was the sole party in contention, resulting in M'ba's reelection as President. Following M'ba's death later that year, Omar Bongo assumed the presidency. On 03/12/1968, the Gabonese Democratic Party succeeded the BDG, becoming the exclusive legal party. The PDG and Bongo secured re-election in one-party elections in 1973, 1980, and 1985. Constitutional amendments in May 1990 reinstated the multi-party system.¹¹ According to LIED executive and legislative elections, which weren't multiparty, were held. As classified by FH for this regime period, the country is scored from 11 to 14 as not free, which corresponds to our interpretation of not free. Moreover, political liberties remained constantly absent (LIED). Following V-Dem's PCLI scores them as absent from 1968 to 1969 and as not really present from 1970 onwards. In 1967, based on Polity5's evaluation, the executive faced weak constraints, classified as Intermediate Category 1 between unlimited authority and slight limitations. Since 1968, as per Polity5's classification, the executive wielded unrestricted authority without any formal limitations during this time. During this regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

09/16/1990 End One-Party Autocracy/Start Electoral (Personalist) Autocracy: On this date, after antigovernment demonstrations, violent disorders, and a national conference including opposition groups, parliamentary elections were held, the first multiparty elections since 1967.¹² Results from 32 of the 120 constituencies were annulled after public protests claiming fraud by the ruling Gabonese Democratic Party and the second round was postponed. Re-runs were held on 10/21/1990, with a second round on 10/28/1990. Thirteen parties and 553 candidates contested the election, with the Gabonese Democratic party retaining control of the National Assembly by winning 63 of the 120 seats.¹³ Although Gabon holds multiparty elections, the PDG dominates the multiparty system and President Ali Bongo maintained political dominance through patronage and repression.¹⁴ Presidential term limits were abolished in 2003.¹⁵ After the death of Bongo in 2009, Ali Bongo Ondimba, his son, won the 2009 Gabonese presidential election and was reelected in 2016, in elections marred by numerous irregularities, arrests, human rights violations and post-election protests and violence.¹⁶ In February 2021, President Bongo's Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG) won 45 of the Senate's 52 elected seats. Opposition parties remained divided, and the government has impeded their activities by withholding permits for public gatherings, apprehending participants in their mostly peaceful protests, and imprisoning their leaders¹⁷ According to our observations presidential and parliamentary elections in this period were multiparty but non-competitive. This aligns with the observations of LIED. V-Dem's EF&FI indicates that the elections were not really free and fair from 1991 to 1995, from 2011 to 2015. For the remaining years EF&FI signals that the overall election conditions were ambiguous. V-Dem's CEI indicates that elections were either not really clean or not clean in this period. Per FH's scoring for 1990, the country is classified as partly free with a score of 8, which we categorize as rather not free. In 1991 a score of 6 to 7 designates the country as partly free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather free. In 1982 the country is partly free with a score of 8, which we interpret as rather not free. Between 1993 and 2008 Gabon scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. From 2009 onward it is scored from 11 to 14 as not free, which corresponds to our interpretation of not free. Besides, according to LIED political liberties were not given. Despite the classification as an electoral autocracy, V-Dem's PCLI indicates the political liberties as somewhat present between 1991 and 2011 and since 2019. For the other six years full political liberties are stated. Until 2008, according to Polity5, during this period, the executive's constraints fell into Intermediate Category 1, between unlimited authority and slight limitations. Between 2009 and 2018, based on Polity5's assessment, the executive's power was noticeably limited but not substantial, fitting Intermediate Category 2. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while our classification of V-Dem's LCE alternates

between legislative constraints being limited (1992-2009, 2012-2018) and absent (1991, 2010, 2011, 2020-2023).

08/30/2023 End Electoral (Personalist) Autocracy/Start Military Autocracy: After the government imposed sweeping restrictions during the August general elections, including blocking internet access, imposing a curfew, and suspending media outlets, a coup d'état was declared by senior military officers shortly after the incumbent was announced as the victor. Brice Oligui Nguema was declared transitional president with virtually no constraints on his power. In September 2023, he appointed a new prime minister, and in October, a new transitional parliament. The military retained firm control over government activities.¹⁸ On 11/16/2024 a constitutional referendum was held and passed with over 91%, on a turnout of over 54%. The referendum introduced a new constitution as part of the military junta's promise to reinstate civilian rule after the 2023 coup d'état. Key provisions include establishing a presidential system with a seven-year term, renewable once consecutively, and abolishing the office of Prime Minister. These constitutional changes have laid the groundwork for the next presidential election. Besides, political liberties are absent according to LIED but can be interpreted as somewhat present by V-Dem's PCLI. FH classifies the country as not free with a score of 12, which we also place in the not free category in our framework.

04/12/2025 End Military Autocracy/Start Electoral Autocracy: On this date the new constitution officially took effect.¹⁹ Transitional President Brice Oligui Nguema ran as an independent candidate. He won the election by a wide margin, receiving 94.85% of the vote. Several high-ranking opposition candidates were excluded from the election due to new age restrictions.²⁰

Electoral Autocracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Notes

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Gabon/History>; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabon>

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabon>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Gabon

⁴ https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89lections_territoriales_gabonaises_de_1957

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabon>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%C3%A9on_M%27ba#Rise_to_power

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%C3%A9on_M%27ba#Rise_to_power

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1961_Gabonese_general_election

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Hilaire_Aubame#1964_Gabon_coup_d'%C3%A9tat

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1964_Gabonese_parliamentary_election

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabonese_Democratic_Party

¹² <https://www.britannica.com/place/Gabon/Gabon-since-independence>

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1990_Gabonese_legislative_election;
https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Gabon_2011?lang=en

¹⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/gabon>

¹⁵ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/gabon/freedom-world/2022>

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali_Bongo_Ondimba

¹⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/gabon/freedom-world/2022>

¹⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/gabon/freedom-world/2024>

¹⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_Gabonese_constitutional_referendum

²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025_Gabonese_presidential_election

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