

Gabonese President Omar Bongo (1935-2009)

A tool of French imperialism in Africa

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Gabonese President Omar Bongo died on June 7 of intestinal cancer in a Spanish hospital, after holding power for nearly 42 years. His falling-out with France in recent years notwithstanding, his career was dedicated to the defense of French imperialism's commercial and strategic interests in sub-Saharan Africa. It testifies to the bankruptcy of the bourgeois-nationalist regimes to which France handed power at decolonization.

A consummate political survivor, Bongo kept power by placing the resources of his impoverished, oil-rich country in the hands of foreign oil companies and politicians. Unable to resolve bitter internal divisions and poverty in Gabon—the legacy of French colonial rule—the Bongo regime stayed in power only thanks to the French army. Deploying a cynicism symbolized by his repeated, politically expedient religious conversions, he amassed an immense personal fortune by taking a cut of the spoils plundered from his own country.

After Bongo's death, the power struggle for his succession was concentrated inside the ruling party, the Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG), between his daughter Pascaline and his son Ali. Ultimately, Ali was chosen as the PDG's candidate, and won the August 30 elections.

Omar Bongo was born Albert-Bernard Bongo, into a farming family with 12 children in southern Gabon. He was orphaned at age 12, then raised by an uncle working for the colonial administration. At age 17 he left home for Brazzaville, the capital of the nearby French Congo, and worked at a post office.

Upon his arrival in Brazzaville, he joined the Freemasonry and the social-democratic SFIO (French Section of the Workers' International). Freemasonry, a bourgeois and secular secret society, had longstanding traditions in the colonial administration. During World War II, it helped rally sections of the colonial administration to de Gaulle, against the anti-Masonic Philippe Pétain, who led the Vichy regime collaborating with the Nazi occupation.

Bongo performed his obligatory French military service from 1958 to 1960, serving in air force intelligence, where he attained the rank of lieutenant. He briefly returned to work for the Post Office in the Gabonese capital, Libreville. The same year Bongo was discharged from the French armed forces, Gabon was formally granted independence from France.

These associations gave Bongo an introduction into the French political establishment; Bongo joked later in life that he still had his SFIO membership card.

More broadly, Bongo was coming to French bourgeois politics at a pivotal time. Discredited by its capitulation to Nazi Germany and then by its unsuccessful wars to maintain colonial rule in Indochina and Algeria, French imperialism was developing a layer of the native petty-bourgeoisie to protect its interests in the local state apparatus.

At the 1944 Brazzaville conference, bourgeois Resistance leader General Charles de Gaulle promised to abolish the longstanding, discriminatory Indigenous Code. In its place, he presented a vague plan where Africans, as de Gaulle said, "could rise step by step up to the level where they could participate at home in the administration of their own affairs." The Governor-General of French Equatorial Africa at the time of the conference, Félix Éboué, was himself a black man, a Mason and a social-democrat from Guyana. He advocated a policy of "assimilation" at the conference, which was accepted.

The massive repression and colonial wars needed to maintain French rule in the colonies proved too costly for France's war-torn economy and too unpopular with the working class in France. Between 1945 and 1960, France spent 32.5 billion Gold-Francs in its colonies, twice as much as it received from the US Marshall Plan for post-World War II reconstruction. As de Gaulle explained, "decolonization is our interest, and therefore it is our policy."

At the same time, however, French imperialism had no intention of giving up control of these colonies, from which it took valuable raw materials and cheap labor. The result was the so-called *FranceAfrique* system: in exchange for allowing a layer of the African petty-bourgeoisie to formally hold power, French imperialism would keep exploiting its former colonies.

Bongo later explained this set-up as follows: "Gabon without France, it's a car with no driver. France without Gabon, it's a car with no gas."

If French imperialism was able to carry out this policy, it was above all because the SFIO and the French Communist Party (PCF) repeatedly betrayed the struggles of the working class: the insurrectionary battles during the liberation of France from the Nazis in 1945, and the repeated strike waves after the war. These parties threw their political weight behind de Gaulle, who built his regime by winning the support of French authorities that had ruled under the Nazis.

The social democrats and the Stalinists helped fight France's colonial wars, most prominently in the war policy of SFIO premier Guy Mollet in Algeria.

The nationally oriented perspective of the PCF also helped French imperialism recruit the African cadre with which it would continue to rule Africa. PCF-affiliated *Groupes d'Etudes Communistes* (GEC, Communist Study Groups) liquidated into a series of African bourgeois-nationalist parties grouped in the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA, African Democratic Rally) — whose most prominent leader was future Ivory Coast president Félix Houphouët-Boigny. Within Gabon, the RDA was represented by Léon Mba, the future president of Gabon and political patron of Bongo.

With the proletariat politically strangled by the social democrats and the Stalinists, the French bourgeoisie could deploy its full financial and military resources in Gabon— not to repair the ravages of colonization, but to loot its natural resources and use it as a base for intrigue in Africa.

The Gaullists created a complex system of networks and lobbies in

Decolonization: a betrayal of the masses

Africa, allowing the French bourgeoisie to not only earn huge profits, but also to plan a series of assassinations, military coups, and interventions.

The main organiser of these networks was Jacques Foccart. An ex-resistance fighter, Foccart came to be known as de Gaulle's "Mister Africa," also playing that role under Presidents Georges Pompidou and Jacques Chirac. Foccart also took part in the creation of the SAC (*Service d'Action Civique – Civil Action Service*) — the Gaullist movement's security service, which participated in many acts of violence against left-wing students and striking workers in France.

The regime that evolved under Bongo— a one-party dictatorship dependent on French military support to repress the masses at every major internal crisis— was perfectly suited to French imperialism's requirements.

FranceAfrique: how Bongo came to power

Bongo quickly made his first steps into politics, using his connections in Freemasonry to get involved in the first election campaign of the independent Gabon, in 1961. He managed to be spotted and courted by both main politicians contesting for power: Léon Mba and Jean-Hilaire Aubame.

Aubame favored a parliamentary regime, while Mba preferred a strong presidency. Bongo ultimately chose to side with Mba, who was also De Gaulle's choice. Before Gabon's independence, both Mba and Bongo expressed the wish that Gabon could become a French *département*, i.e. formally a part of France, like Martinique and Guadeloupe, with the French tricolor inserted into the Gabonese flag.

Having lost the election, Aubame agreed to become Mba's Prime minister. But Mba did not trust Aubame and tried to have him assassinated in 1963. This backfired, as a military coup briefly brought Aubame to power in 1964.

France intervened, sending paratroopers to restore Mba to power. Bongo was jailed during the coup. From this experience, he reportedly drew the conclusion that he could not trust the Gabonese army, and that it was better to rely on French troops.

Bongo became defense minister in 1965, replacing Mba when his health deteriorated the same year. He was appointed Vice-President and took the interim on Mba's death in 1967. He soon proclaimed a single-party system, ruled by his own *Parti démocratique gabonaise* (PDG).

Bongo turned Gabon into an outpost to serve French interests in Africa. He helped France in its support for the secessionist war in the oil-rich Nigerian province of Biafra. Foccart organised the sending of weapons to Biafra, hiding them in aid cargo air-shipped by the Red Cross through the Libreville airport. He also sent in numerous mercenaries, including the best-known of France's guns-for-hire, Bob Denard.

The Catholic charity Caritas also took part in logistical support for Biafra fighters. At this point, Bongo converted to the Catholicism, visiting Pope Paul VI in 1968.

Bongo would continue to assist French interventions in Africa. In 1977, he covered up French President Valérie Giscard d'Estaing's failed attempt at overthrowing Benin's nationalist leader, Mathieu Kérékou. This decision was significant: Bongo might have helped his Gaullist allies like Jacques Chirac, who were political opponents of Giscard d'Estaing, by revealing the affair. However, on such matters, Bongo deferred to overall French strategic interests.

The plundering of Gabon

In the early 1970s, oil became Gabon's biggest export. The country joined OPEC in 1975. In order to prepare for this, Bongo converted to Islam in 1973, at the recommendation of Libyan dictator Moammar Gaddafi. He took Omar as his first name.

Gabon's oil industry was largely operated by French oil company Elf, now absorbed into French oil major Total. Besides a small portion used to bribe the ruling Gabonese clique around Bongo, the oil revenues were stolen by a corrupt layer of French businessmen and politicians.

Elf itself was a political creation, part and parcel of the *FranceAfrique* networks set up by de Gaulle and Foccart, designed to further French imperialism's interests in newly "independent" Africa. Deeply corrupt, it has provided funds for a variety of French political and strategic initiatives and created a string of scandals, most notably in recent times over kickbacks in France's 1991 sale of six frigates to Taiwan.

Former Elf president Loïc Le Floch-Prigent, who was convicted of embezzling millions from Elf in 2003, testified in court: "In 1962, [Elf founder Pierre Guillaumat] convinced [Charles de Gaulle] to set up a parallel structure of real oil technicians. [By creating Elf] the Gaullists wanted a real secular arm of the state in Africa...a sort of permanent ministry of oil...a sort of intelligence office in the oil-producing countries."

Asked to explain Elf's relations with its African oil suppliers, Le Floch-Prigent said: "Let's call a spade a spade. Elf's money goes to Africa and comes back to France."

This money allowed right-wing forces to buy influence in French politics as well. Bongo reportedly financed Giscard d'Estaing in 1974 against the centre-right candidate Chaban-Delmas, and then Jacques Chirac in every subsequent presidential election until 2007.

In 1989, President François Mitterrand of the Socialist Party arranged that this money would now benefit both the left and the right, according to Le Floch-Prigent's testimony. He said: "I asked Mitterrand, 'Do you want me to cut the flow [i.e., of funds], yes or no?' and Mitterrand answered, 'Ah ! No, we continue what was put in place by General de Gaulle.' And he simply asked me to rebalance things, without forgetting [Chirac's] RPR party."

Bongo thus presided over a system whereby Gabon's economy was plundered in the interests of a narrow layer of corrupt French politicians and businessmen. Reflecting its oil and mineral wealth, Gabon has substantial GDP: \$21.4 billion a year, or \$14,400 per capita. This is four times that of most sub-Saharan African nations. However, with these funds siphoned off largely by France or by the ruling clique around Bongo, the Gabonese masses remain mired in bitter poverty.

Life expectancy at birth is 53 years, putting Gabon in 198th place among the world's countries, and there are only 29 doctors per 100,000 inhabitants. Only 3.8 percent of Gabon's GDP is spent on education, ranking it 118th. The UN's IRIN news service notes that 30 percent of the population lives under the official poverty line, and that "according to the IMF, Gabon's social indicators are more in line with those of low-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa."

According to former French investigating judge Eva Joly, who led an inquiry into Bongo's affairs, Gabon builds five kilometres of roads every year, for a road network that is only 900 km long.

On the other end of the social spectrum, a tiny layer of Gabonese thrives. In a recent issue of *Jeune Afrique* (the international edition), one learns they travel in private jets from Libreville to Paris for a day of shopping, and that last year, Gabon was the fourth largest African importer of champagne, with 181 000 bottles.

As a state whose wealth was largely based on oil revenues, Gabon remains desperately vulnerable to falls in oil prices on international markets. From 1986 to 1990, low oil prices created a massive series of strikes through all economic sectors and among students. In 1988, Bongo began to discuss with his political opponents, whose most prominent

figure was father Paul Mba Abessole. Bongo hoped they could channel the anger into safe waters, but he was still hesitating over granting a multiparty system.

On January 16, 1990, students at Omar Bongo University in Libreville struck against the lack of funding. It was called the "Diarrheal Strike," because it started over a massive food poisoning of all students at the campus canteen. The next day, police evacuated the university by force. From the 18th on, the unrest spread into the city involving all sections of the population.

On February 24, Bongo obtained the capitulation of students by offering to pay for damages and inviting them publicly to a feast in his palace. But only two days later, strikes erupted in air traffic control, gas stations, railways, and the electricity company. Riots began anew, and the army took up positions to protect Bongo's palace.

On March 21, workers at oil refineries accounting for 70 percent of Gabon's exports, began striking too. On March 23, Bongo tried to calm things down by calling a national conference on a multiparty system, but the strikes did not stop. On the 27th, Bongo declared a curfew for the whole country.

The multiparty system was finally proclaimed on April 19, but the lives of Gabonese did not improve. On May 23, upon the death of opposition leader Joseph Rendjambe, a riot started at Port-Gentil, during which the French consulate was burned down. The disturbances quickly spread to the whole country once again. On the next day, France sent in troops, officially to evacuate its 1800 citizens from Gabon. They also secured the country's oil refineries. On May 31, French troops had regained control of the situation and had again kept Bongo in power.

In the first multi-party legislative elections held in November 1990, Bongo's party won 63 seats against 57 for the various opposition parties. The first presidential election with more than one candidate was held on December 5, 1993. Bongo was re-elected on the first round with 51.1 percents of the votes, followed by Abessole. The troubles following this election, which was widely suspected of being rigged, ultimately led Bongo to sign the so-called Paris agreements with the opposition.

After 1990: an erosion of *FranceAfrique*

French influence in Gabon, and more broadly in Africa, began to weaken in the 1990s. This was not the reflection of any growing independence of leaders like Bongo from world imperialism, or of effective political opposition to Bongo in the Gabonese ruling elite—which Bongo continued to co-opt with state funds.

Rather, Bongo, like other African rulers, was developing closer ties with other great powers; initially to US imperialism, and more recently to commercial competition from China.

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991 removed Soviet competition as a common enemy for US and French imperialism, Washington pursued a more aggressive policy in Paris' African "backyard." This was reflected in Gabon's trade relations. In 1990, France was Gabon's leading trade partner, with 38 percent of exports and 60.6 percents of import. North America accounted for 22 and 11 percent respectively. Today, France is third for exports, with only 9.4 percent, and its leading position for imports has eroded, with 28 percent.

The US played a role in removing the French-backed regimes of Mobutu in Zaire (the former Belgian Congo) in 1997, and Habyarimana in neighboring Rwanda in 1994. Paris helped protect the Hutu regime in Rwanda, whose genocide against the Tutsis and oppositional Hutus claimed 800,000 lives. The civil war that broke out in Zaire (today the Democratic Republic of the Congo) would claim several million lives.

Bongo was too tied to France to switch alliances overnight, but he cultivated links with the US, as well. During the civil war in neighboring Republic of Congo between 1993 and 1999, he sold weapons both to Elf's proxy, Denis Sassou Nguesso, and to Pascal Lissouba, who wanted to switch oil contracts to the US company Oxy. As Gabon was one of the few countries in the region not to descend into civil war, Bongo portrayed himself as a helpful negotiator for peace in Africa.

By the onset of the present decade, Bongo was moving closer to the US. In 2000, A US Senate commission led by Democrat Carl Levin estimated that Bongo deposited \$130 million in his accounts at New York's Citibank between 1985 and 1997. On November 9, 2005, the *New York Times* reported that Bongo had given \$9 million to US lobbyist Jack Abramoff to arrange a meeting with Bush. Bongo denied this.

Tensions from corruption investigations in France, such as the Elf Affair, soured Paris' relations with Bongo. In its obituary of Bongo, *Le Figaro* wrote that he "knew everything about everyone, that was his best life insurance policy: 'I would sink a lot of people,' he would say, in a barely disguised threat."

Bongo himself was targeted by the French justice system in the so-called "illegally acquired goods" scandal. Bongo, President Nguesso of Congo-Brazzaville, and President Teodoro Obiang Nguéma of Equatorial Guinea were accused of embezzlement by non-governmental organizations in France. In 2008, the daily *Le Monde* revealed they owned 150 million Euro in luxury apartments and houses bought with state money, in France alone. The investigation was temporarily halted in May 2009, and Bongo died before it resumed.

Throughout this period, Bongo maintained his rule by using Gabon's oil wealth to buy off a series of opposition politicians. Perhaps the most famous recent case was that of Union of the Gabonese People (UPG) leader Pierre Mamboundou, who finished second in the 2005 elections behind Bongo, with 13.5 percent of the vote. Mamboundou briefly took refuge in the South African embassy in 2006, after Gabonese security forces raided UPG headquarters. However, in 2007 Bongo met with Mamboundou and negotiated a political truce in exchange for a development loan for Mamboundou's municipality, Ndendé.

Whatever concessions Bongo has made to his opponents, and French imperialism has made to its rivals in Gabon, the election of Ali Bongo to replace his father Omar symbolizes the essential continuity of imperialist influence in Gabon. Oil major Total is still a leading enterprise there, part of a French presence in the country that includes 120 companies and the stationing of France's 6th Marine Battalion in Libreville.



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