

Protesters in Gabon call for president to step down

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Protesters have taken to the streets in recent weeks in the African nation of Gabon, demanding that President Ali Ben Bongo resign. The protests took place following a January 25 declaration by opposition leader Andre Obame that he was the rightful president.

Obame was one of the losing candidates in the snap presidential elections called in August 2009 following the death of Ali Ben Bongo's father, Omar Bongo, who ruled Gabon since 1967.

According to the website IQ4News, police tear-gassed 5,000 protesters on the streets of the capital, Libreville, on Saturday, January 29. Twenty people were injured. There are also reports of 2,000 people demonstrating in Bitam in the north of Gabon on Monday, January 31, as well as riots in many districts of Libreville on Wednesday, February 2. Executives and sympathisers of the opposition National Union party have been arrested.

Protesters at the demonstrations carried banners that read, "In Tunisia, Ben Ali left. In Gabon, Ali Ben out."

Following Obame's declaration, Gabon's president closed down his opponent's TV channel and dissolved his National Unity Party (NUP). Obame and a group of supporters are currently in the UN compound in Libreville, seeking their protection. The Africa Union, which is supporting Alassane Ouattara's claim to be the legitimate presidential winner in the Ivory Coast's contested elections, are not supporting Obame's claim and accuse him of endangering "the peace, the security and stability of Gabon."

Obame's bid for power follows the WikiLeaks cable revelation that former President Bongo, the current president's father, embezzled millions of dollars from the Bank of Central African States (BEAC). A bank official told a US diplomat about the "brazen" fraud conducted by the president of Gabon shortly after Bongo died.

"Gabonese officials used the proceeds for their own enrichment and, at Bongo's direction, funnelled funds to French political parties, including in support of French President Nicolas Sarkozy."

The cable went on, "Asked what the officials did with the

stolen funds, the BEAC official responded, 'Sometimes they kept it for themselves, sometimes they funnelled it to French political parties.' Asked who received the funds, the official responded, 'Both sides, but mostly the right, especially Chirac and including Sarkozy.' The BEAC official said 'Bongo was France's favourite president in Africa,' and 'this is classic Francafrique.'"

Under a subheading, "The easy way to rob a bank," the cable explains that Bongo was able to defraud BEAC because his appointees were in charge of international wire transfers. The whole process was made easier by the fact that the accountant working in BEAC's Paris branch, Armand Brice Nzamba, was a personal friend of Bongo.

The cable relates to a specific case in which \$36 million was embezzled over a period of five years. However, the practice is thought to have gone on for decades. It has been alleged that President Chirac received illegal funding from Bongo during his 1981 campaign.

Gabon, a former French colony, gained independence in 1960 but has remained under French influence ever since. The French put Bongo senior in power in 1967. When he died, he was the world's longest-serving head of state, with the exception of the monarchs of Britain and Thailand.

France exercised an indirect influence on the elections that followed the death of Bongo. In August 2009, when elections took place to select a successor for Bongo senior, Robert Bourgi, a close adviser to Sarkozy, told *Le Monde*, "In Gabon, France does not have a candidate, but Robert Bourgi's candidate is Ali Bongo. And I'm a very influential friend of Nicolas Sarkozy. Subliminally, voters will understand."

Another WikiLeaks cable from the US embassy in Tripoli dated November 2009 discusses the role of Bourgi and regrets his "insider" influence. It notes that Bourgi is "touted by the French press as the new standard bearer of the old 'francafrique' " and "operates in the shadows".

Both Sarkozy and former French president Valery Giscard d'Estaing attended Bongo senior's funeral in Gabon.

Obama's claim that he won the recent presidential elections has been boosted by a French television documentary entitled "Françafrique", and shown in December last year. It claimed that Obama was the victor, garnering 42 percent of the vote, and that the figures were simply switched to make Ali Ben Bongo the winner.

Interviewed in September of last year by Anne Kappes-Grange of the French weekly magazine *Jeune Afrique*, Obama said, "I am the one who won the election. The records attest to it".

Asked if he stood by his warning made in March 2010 that Gabon faced the possibility of a coup similar to what happened in Niger, he explained, "In Gabon, all the factors favouring a coup actually exist. I am saying that in politics, stubbornness, arrogance, blindness and provocation invariably lead to the same punishment, sooner or later."

He said that personally he did not believe in coups, but admitted that he had been approached by soldiers on several occasions. He declined to name them.

Gabon is a rich prize in the struggle for natural resources in Africa. Gabon's natural resources are putting it at the centre of geostrategic conflicts that will inevitably affect the struggle between Bongo junior and Obama.

The country has benefited from offshore oil production, with an average per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$14,000. Gabon's GDP is four times that of the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, and in the top third of all nations.

However, high levels of inequality mean that this wealth only benefits a small elite. It is estimated that 70 percent of the population live below the poverty line. The country's oil wealth has not been used to for development; only 10 percent of roads are paved and health care and sanitation are nonexistent.

Apart from its oil reserves, which make Gabon one of the largest producers of oil in sub-Saharan Africa, the country also has what is thought to be the biggest untapped deposit of iron ore in the world. In 2006, Gabon signed a deal with the Chinese government to exploit the Belinga iron ore deposit in Ogooue-Ivindo province. China plans to build two hydroelectric dams, a 560-kilometre railway line and a deepwater port at Santa Clara. The project will be entirely financed by the Export-Import Bank of China.

The extent of China's influence is indicated by the fact that Bongo junior has appointed a Chinese presidential adviser. In addition, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi is set to visit Gabon as part of an Africa tour that will take include Zimbabwe, Chad, Guinea and Togo, as well as the United Arab Emirates.

George Fang, Standard Bank's head of Mining and Metals China, recently told a meeting of the mining industry in South Africa that China is now the undisputed leader in the race for Africa's resources.

"The race for Africa's mineral resources continues to gather momentum. Continued growth in consumption resources is being driven by growth in China and the rest of Asia. Chinese companies are increasingly acquiring assets, as are Indian companies, prompting other global miners into a race to secure mineral assets of their own".

Fang pointed to major Chinese infrastructure investments in Mauritania, Sudan, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Angola and Zambia. "Historically, China has not been a major foreign investor in mining, but over the past five years that has changed. The number of deals that China is initiating has grown exponentially on every continent, but especially Africa", observed Fang.

As the US attempts to recover the ground it has lost in Africa, it may well look to alternative political figures in Gabon who are prepared to work more closely with Washington than Beijing.

See also:

Gabonese President Omar Bongo
[5 September 2009]



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