

France pushes for regime change after contested elections in Gabon

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The Gabonese capital of Libreville is on lockdown, and violent clashes are erupting after the results of Saturday's contested presidential election were announced on Wednesday. Well before any investigation of the election returns has begun, however, Paris is demanding that incumbent President Ali Bongo hand over power in the oil-rich former French colony to the French-backed candidate, Jean Ping.

Political tensions were running high in the days before the announcement of the election results, with tanks in the streets and large areas of Libreville already deserted. Inhabitants stocked food and returned home early from work in anticipation of street fighting.

After official results came out on Wednesday—Bongo received 49.8 percent and Ping 48.2 percent, handing Bongo the election under the terms of Gabon's first-past-the-post presidential election system—opposition supporters organized protests and clashed with riot police. They also partially burned down the Gabonese National Assembly Wednesday night.

Yesterday, France's ruling Socialist Party (PS) issued a public statement bluntly demanding that Bongo cede power to Ping.

“It has been a half-century that the Bongo family has ruled Gabon,” it declared. “Handing over power would be a sign of good faith and would provide a good example to follow.”

The Bongo family, which has ruled Gabon in close collaboration with French imperialism since Ali's father took power in 1965 based on a French military intervention in Gabon that toppled Jean-Hilaire Aubame, declined to respond to the PS statement. However, after the burning of the National Assembly, they sent special forces to storm Ping's campaign headquarters and launched mass arrests. Interior

Minister Pacôme Moubelet-Boubeya said that over 1,000 people had been detained nationwide.

The situation in Gabon remains extremely volatile, with contradictory reports emerging on events in the country's major cities.

Several people were killed yesterday when security forces stormed Ping's campaign headquarters, and Ping said that 26 top politicians are still detained there. They include René Obiang, the former assistant general secretary of Bongo's Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG), who left the PDG last year; former Vice President Didjob Divungui Di Ding; and leaders of the opposition National Union (UN) party, Zacharie Myboto and Paul-Marie Gondjout.

Ping, who sought refuge in the French embassy in Libreville before the election results came out, is working to rally support for the opposition in the European press and ruling circles.

Le Monde published an extensive, sympathetic interview with Ping last night, in which he compared the situation in Gabon to that in Syria—where the NATO powers have armed opposition forces in a war to topple the sitting president, Bashar al-Assad. Asked if he was safe, Ping replied: “No one is safe in Gabon anymore. We have a tyrant that is shooting his population, just like Assad. Who can be safe in such conditions? No one!”

Ping called for Bongo to organize an internationally-monitored vote recount. When asked by *Le Monde* about his relations to the French authorities, he replied: “I am doing everything I can to have excellent relations with the French, both on the left and on the right.”

These remarks were echoed by Ping's lawyer in Paris, Eric Moutet, who told French business daily *Les Echos*: “Mr Jean Ping vigorously reaffirms, in agreement with the European Union and the United States, that a

recount, poll station by poll station, is the only way to guarantee the integrity of the election result.”

Paris' claims that it is intervening to defend democracy and ensure a peaceful handover of power in the interests of the Gabonese people are a reactionary fraud. It is launching an imperialist regime change operation. Amid escalating divisions and conflicts within the Bongo clique itself, the PS government is intervening to back a dissident faction of the Bongo regime in an attempt to fashion a more stable basis for its continued domination of this key African state.

The clearest indication of this is Ping's own career. The son of an influential Franco-Chinese businessman and a Gabonese mother, he is Ali Bongo's former brother-in-law, having married and divorced Ali's sister Pascaline Bongo, who played the role of financial advisor to her father Omar until his death in 2009.

According to *La Diplomatie*, Ping has large real estate holdings both in France and Ivory Coast, whose president Laurent Gbagbo was toppled by a French military intervention in 2011, as part of a wave of French neo-colonial wars in Africa after the outbreak of the NATO war in Libya. He runs the consulting firm Ping & Ping with his son.

Ping is intimately familiar with the corrupt financial circuits through which Gabon's oil wealth was siphoned off over decades by the French government and oil industry. He was a beneficiary of this system, which also allotted a small portion of the profits to buying off a tiny clique around Bongo himself. Omar Bongo amassed an estate worth an estimated €450 million (US\$503 million), triggering bitter battles among his children after his death over how to divide his power and wealth.

The masses' living standards in Gabon, whose economy produces over \$10,000 per inhabitant, are not significantly different from those of nearby impoverished sub-Saharan African countries where the majority of the population lives on the equivalent of a few dollars a day.

French imperialism is intervening not to defend democracy, but to preserve this neo-colonial social order in Gabon. Paris felt that its interests were threatened not only by escalating social discontent with the Bongo regime, but above all by Ali Bongo's developing ties with China, whose economic and political influence is surging across Africa.

After coming to power, Ali Bongo allegedly took tens of millions of dollars in bribes from Chinese construction company Sinohydro, which has won key contracts in Gabon despite the traditional influence of French construction companies in France's former African colonial empire.

Ping's intervention in the Gabonese elections was well-prepared with top French officials, whom he met in Paris last October to discuss the elections. He spoke with PS First Secretary Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, Senator Jean-Pierre Cantegrit, President François Hollande's Africa advisor Hélène Le Gal, diplomat Jean-Christophe Belliard, and Ibrahima Diawadoh, Prime Minister Manuel Valls' Africa advisor.

Ping apparently worked closely with the PS and the regime installed in Ivory Coast by the French army five years ago to prepare a French-backed destabilization campaign. *Jeune Afrique* has published partial transcripts of an intercepted phone call Monday between Ping and Ivorian official Mamadi Diané. In the call, the two men discussed how to launch a destabilization operation against Ali Bongo after the elections.

Diané: “Brother, how is it going?”

Ping: “Yes, I received the paper, we will send it.”

Diané: “No, no, there's something else, more important. You must succeed in getting two or three people onto the electoral commission, who say there was too much funny business and resign.”

Ping: “Yes.”

Diané: “You understand, it will create total chaos. If you can do it tonight, it would be fantastic.”

Ping: “OK, thanks.”

The Ivorian government told Diané to step down after the transcript was made public.



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