

# Secretive Constitutional Revisions Could Harden Gabon's Political Divisions

Robbie Corey-Boulet | Thursday, Dec. 21, 2017

Last week, the National Assembly of Gabon passed a bill that would revise the country's constitution. It did so with as little fanfare as possible. As AFP noted

(<https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/gabon-mps-pass-disputed-constitutional-text-20171215>), the news went unmentioned on state media, and the official who confirmed it to the agency

declined to give his name.

This is perhaps unsurprising given that President Ali Bongo Ondimba's government has kept the actual substance of the revisions under wraps as well, opting not to make the bill public even though the Cabinet approved it back in September before sending it to lawmakers. Multiple versions have circulated online (<https://www.voafrique.com/a/le-projet-de-revision-de-la-constitution-fait-debat-au-gabon/4083838.html>), but the government has not addressed their authenticity.

Regardless of whether the state deigns to discuss them, the bill, which now needs to go to the Senate, is the talk of Gabon's political class. The Central African nation doesn't have a presidential term limit, so there's no need for Bongo to mimic other African leaders (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/03/africas-softer-gentler-coups-detat/>) who have tried to change the rules so they can stay in power. But government critics have denounced the proposed revisions as an attempt to grant even greater authority to the president at the expense of the legislature and oversight bodies. Last month, Jean Ping, who narrowly lost the 2016 presidential election to Bongo, told his supporters that the government's endeavor "carries the seeds of the republic's liquidation." He and other opposition politicians have claimed the bill would establish a monarchy (<http://www.gabonactu.com/revision-de-la-constitution-myboto-denonce-un-projet-taille-sur-la-mesure-dali-bongo/>) in place of Gabon's young, fragile democracy.

The government says these concerns are unfounded. "No one in Gabon has the need, the wish, the desire, to set up a monarchy, even if it is constitutional," government spokesman Alain-Claude Bilie-By-Nze said in October (<https://www.voafrique.com/a/le-projet-de-revision-de-la-constitution-fait-debat-au-gabon/4083838.html>). To the



*Gabonese President Ali Bongo Ondimba attends an event at the EU-Africa summit, Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, Nov. 29, 2017 (AP photo by Diomande Ble Blonde).*

contrary, the government has stressed that the changes will enhance official accountability by creating a new judicial mechanism to try high-ranking officials.

The truth no doubt lies somewhere in between the two sides' increasingly polarized positions. Gyldas Ofoulhast-Othamot, a Gabonese professor of political science at the University of Tampa, says the specific changes are likely to be less dramatic than the opposition makes out. In general, he says, they would merely be “enshrining what has already been happening on the ground” as Bongo struggles to put the turmoil of last year's election behind him.

As an example, Ofoulhast-Othamot pointed to a potential provision, included in one of the circulated copies, that would require government ministers and the heads of Gabon's security forces to pledge allegiance to Bongo. While this has come in for heavy criticism, Ofoulhast-Othamot says this is essentially what already happens each year during celebrations marking Gabon's national flag day.

Bongo has had legitimacy issues for his entire political life. He won the presidency in 2009 in an election necessitated by the death of his father, Omar Bongo, who had ruled the oil-producing country for more than 40 years. Ali Bongo's opponents challenged the vote's integrity, but he was able to take office despite protests.

The results of last year's election were similarly contested. In that race, Bongo's main rival, Ping, a former chairperson of the African Union Commission, outperformed Bongo in six of Gabon's nine provinces, and Bongo's win was only secured after officials reported 99.9 percent turnout in his home province—a highly dubious figure given that turnout nationwide was a mere 59 percent.

***Bongo is eager to move on from last year's election turmoil, and he seems to be having some success convincing the rest of the world to do the same.***

The opposition says more than 50 people (<https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/gabon-mulls-amnesty-for-post-election-violence-20170914>) were killed in ensuing clashes between protesters and security forces, while the government has put the death toll at three. Though things have calmed down, Ping has continued to take every chance he can to paint the outcome as fraudulent. For example, last May, just minutes after the official results of France's presidential election were announced, Ping sent a letter (<http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20170508-gabon-france-emmanuel-macron-jean-ping-lettre-president-elu>) to Emmanuel Macron introducing himself as Gabon's “president-elect.”

In a bid to address these lingering election-related tensions, Bongo's government convened a national dialogue that lasted from March until May, though Ping refused to participate. Bongo has clearly decided to move on without him, and his recent appearances abroad indicate he's having some success convincing the rest of the world to do the same. Last year, with the post-election violence still fresh and Ping warning that Bongo would never again be accepted by the international community, the president skipped the United Nations General Assembly in New York, sending his foreign minister (<https://gadebate.un.org/en/71/gabon>) in his place. This year, he was able to attend and meet U.S. President Donald Trump. He followed that up with appearances at last month's EU-Africa summit in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, and climate talks in Bonn, Germany, where he represented African nations (<https://www.voanews.com/a/france-macron-urges-europe-fill-climate-funding-gap/4116695.html>).

Back home, though, Bongo remains vulnerable, with threats coming from both the opposition and within the ruling party (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/21646/the-biggest-threat-to-gabon-s-president-won-t-come-from-the-opposition>). A chief objective for the constitutional revisions, then, is to mitigate this vulnerability before holding legislative elections next year—polls that have already been delayed multiple times (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gabon-politics/gabon-postpones-legislative-elections-citing-lack-of-money-idUSKBN13S0GX?il=0>). “If they organize elections right now they will probably lose,” Ofoulhast-Othamot says, referring to the ruling party. This means Bongo has good reason to try and reduce the legislature's ability to place checks on the presidency, something critics contend the constitutional revisions would accomplish.

The bill now heads to the Senate, which, like the National Assembly, is dominated by the ruling party. Despite the uncertainty over what the new constitution might look like, the recent debate has made one thing clear: Political discourse in Gabon remains tense and combative, raising concerns about the elections to come. “People are being radicalized,” Ofoulhast-Othamot says. “The terms that are being used, the political discourse that is being used—these are very, very strong terms. In the past, people would refrain from this. The fear is that in 2018, or in the next presidential election if Ali Bongo is able to stay on, the violence will get to a point where unfortunately it might have broader consequences.”

With Bongo's position strengthening somewhat and Ping appearing as angry as ever about what happened in 2016, such a scenario is looking increasingly likely.

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