Gabon:
Continuity in transition

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The last time Gabon had to manage a political transition after the death of a president was in 1967 when the then president and father of the country’s independence, Leon Mba, succumbed after a long illness. Superbly orchestrated by the Elysée Palace in Paris and executed by the very influential and legendary presidential adviser Foccart, the presidency was offered to a young and promising politician whose most important quality at the time was his loyalty to France. Promising prospects of oil exploitation led Paris to exercise a tight control over the ‘democratic stability’ of the country in the Gulf of Guinea. It was not unusual at that time that France used its leverage to control the appointment of ministers and the ‘election’ of presidents. Forty-two years down the line, supporters of Bongo praise the political stability and the economic prosperity of Gabon whereas his opponents point to the appalling discrepancies between the rich
and the poor in a country of just one million inhabitants and impressive oil wealth. In addition, it has always been contended that President Omar Bongo made use of this wealth to ‘buy off’ the opposition and ensure his re-election over the years by not very legitimate means.

The shock wave that hit the entire political class when President Bongo died in a private hospital in Barcelona last June led many commentators to speculate about a remake of the Togolese scenario in Libreville. In fact, there were allusions to a military-backed dynastic succession or a coup d’état to ensure the continuity of the regime. According to the Gabonese constitution, the transition would be in the hands of the president of the Senate. This post is held by Rose Rogombé, who was to be responsible for the organisation of elections to determine who the new president would be. Preliminary analysis suggested that the transition would operate in favour of the Bongo clan, as Mme Rogombé is a member of the ruling party, the Gabonese Democratic Party.

Things seem to have changed since Bongo’s presidency, however. It would seem as if his successor would not to be determined by an arrangement between the French and African old men’s networks. Instead, the initial stages of the transition were managed by a woman who, in direct contrast with the imperial style of her predecessor, managed to achieve an unexpected consensus on the rules for the presidential election which was held on 30 August 2009. Unfortunately, the respect of the rules was problematic, mainly in the period following the election, and the quick recognition of the result by France casts a shadow over the neutrality of the former colonial power in the election process.

As the country began to put in place the necessary mechanisms for the elections, tensions appeared to have been alleviated, mostly by notable developments of local and municipal electoral procedures and by making facilities available for nationals outside the country to vote. Furthermore Mme Rogombé had the necessary moral authority to allow those institutions required for the smooth running of the process to do their jobs. Her achievements as a neutral, impartial and just president reflect the promises made in her investiture speech in which she undertook to represent and reflect the will of the Gabonese people throughout her transitional regime.

A most compelling illustration of this was the decision to temporarily ‘retire’ Ali Ben Bongo from his ministerial portfolio in view of upcoming presidential campaign. There had been complaints about the access he had to information that would give his campaign an unfair advantage over the opposition. There were expectations that the trend of choosing a presidential candidate from the party in power, in a country that has more often than not favoured political actors from within government ranks, would continue, to the detriment of transparent democratic processes. However, Mme Rogombé effectively allayed these concerns and in a consensual manner that appealed to all and which ensured the transparency required for free and fair elections. As she noted
in her official statement in this regard, there was a need for all presidential candidates to campaign on an equal footing.

Unfortunately, the order did not last long, for political tensions began to emerge shortly after an election date was decided upon. Although the transitional government had managed to make some progress in ensuring the constitution was upheld after Bongo’s death, it seemed to be unable to present a politically unified front once the organisation of the elections began. The Gabonese Democratic Party was racked by in-fighting over which candidate should be the party’s presidential candidate. The Bongo clan wanted to protect its political and economic interests, which were highly dependent on the presidential successor, at all costs. This resulted in in-party manoeuvres to appoint Ali Ben Bongo, son of the deceased president and Minister of Defence at the time, to represent the party. Following a controversial appointment procedure, two high-level party members, namely Prime Minister Jean Eyedhe Ndong and the Minister of the Interior, Mba Obame, resigned from the party and the government, and joined the presidential race as independent candidates. The tensions continued up to the elections, with the three favourite candidates being Ali Ben Bongo, André Mba Obame and Pierre Mamboudou. Each enjoys significant support and it was impossible to predict the outcome for any of these candidates with any certainty.

The election itself took place in an atmosphere of relative calm. However, opposition groups and independent observation missions to the country, including one from the African Union, pointed out a number of irregularities. One of these concerned an inflated voter list of 813 000 registered voters. Given that Gabon has a total population of one million of whom most are under the age of 20, reservations about the plausibility of this figure are understandable. In addition, the number and distribution of stations appeared to favour Ali Ben Bongo – the number of stations in areas where he had popular support were disproportionately large compared to those where the opposition enjoyed support. Moreover, the signal of the TV station covering the campaign of Mba Obame was repeatedly interrupted during campaigning and the election. The government also attempted to prevent the withdrawal of five opposition candidates who rallied behind Mr Obame, claiming their withdrawal was not done within a reasonable time. In an admirable show of strength the constitutional court and transitional president stepped in to re-instate order and transparency within the process and rejected this claim on the basis of the electoral code and the constitution. Other irregularities concerned the delay in publishing the results and disagreements within the electoral commission itself over the presidential choice of Ali Ben Bongo.

Following publication of the results, dissatisfaction resulted in protests in Port-Gentil, the opposition stronghold and economic hub of the country. This discord is still continuing, and opposition remains vocal about its mistrust of the result and is encouraging the population to reject it. The African Union has dispatched a delegate to bring the parties
together to effect an end to the tensions. Internationally, the new president has been congratulated by most countries around the world and the protests are expected to fade away in view of this acceptance by regional and international heads of state.

The new president has begun a presidential tour across the continent. However, the outlook for Ali Ben Bongo is not completely rosy, for he has big shoes to fill. The party support that he enjoys is fairly limited and dependent on his ability to maintain the patrimonial networks which keep the political elite surviving and flourishing. He also faces economic challenges stemming from the global fluctuation in the prices of oil and timber, which are two of Gabon's primary revenue-earning commodities. This situation is complicated by the fact that the Bongo clan, led by his sister Pascaline, control these industries and remain in a position to exert pressure in the future to ensure the protection of their economic interests.

The local population of the country remains extremely dissatisfied about especially the wide gap between the rich and the poor, which could lead to an uprising. Regional factors cannot be excluded, especially political inertia in surrounding countries. As president, Ali Ben Bongo will also face challenges with regard to accommodating the different ethnic, economic and political networks in the country in a manner that maintains the political stability that had existed during the reign of Omar Bongo.

All these factors confirm that Gabon is in for some tough times both economically and politically for the next five years. The way in which these challenges are addressed will depend on Ali Ben Bongo's leadership skills and the strategic alliances he manages to build.