

# African Union suspends Gabon after military coup ousts President Ali Bongo

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Military officers announce that they have seized power in a coup in Gabon.

The Peace and Security Council of the African Union (AU) on Thursday, August 31, suspended Gabon from all its activities, organs and institutions. The announcement followed a day after a military-led coup ousted Gabonese President Ali Bongo Ondimba.

The coup followed just minutes after Bongo was proclaimed the winner of the general elections held in the Central African country on August 26.

In the early hours of August 30, the Gabonese Center of Elections (CGE) announced that Bongo had won Saturday's polls with 64.27% of the votes. Albert Ondo Ossa, former education minister and the consensus candidate put forward by a platform of major opposition parties, Alternance 2023, won 30.77%.

Soon after the results were announced, 12 men, including the police, soldiers from the elite Republican Guard, and the National Gendarmerie, appeared on the television channel *Gabon 24* and declared that the election results stood canceled and that they had seized power "to put an end to the regime."

"Today, the country is going through a serious institutional, political, economic and social crisis," the statement read. "The organization of the general elections of [August 26, 2023] did not meet the conditions for a transparent, credible and inclusive ballot so much hoped for by the people of Gabon."

"Added to this is irresponsible and unpredictable governance, resulting in a continuing deterioration in social cohesion, with the risk of leading the country into chaos."

The soldiers added that they would respect Gabon's commitments to the national and international community.

Identifying themselves as the Committee of Transition and the Restoration of Institutions (CTRI), the group announced that the election results were canceled and

that the borders of the country had been closed. All the institutions of the Republic were dissolved, including the government, the Senate, the National Assembly, the Economic, Social, and Environmental Council, and the CGE.

The announcement was followed by sounds of gunshots in Libreville. However, according to Harold Leckat, the director of news publication *Gabon Media Time*, the shots fired were a form of military communication, which was confirmed to him by senior army officials. “Through these shots, they called out to other corps commanders who then responded with warning shots. It was in fact a way of giving their approval to the movement orchestrated by the Comité de Transition et de Restauration des Institutions [CTRI],” he told *Peoples Dispatch*.

The CTRI placed Bongo under house arrest and proceeded to arrest others, including his son, on charges such as corruption, embezzlement, and treason.

Following a meeting, the group proceeded to name General Brice Oligui Nguema, the head of the Republican Guard, as the president of the transition. He will be sworn in on September 4.

Nguema had been an assistant to former President Omar Bongo until 2009 when Ali Bongo came to power. The General worked in Gabon’s embassies in Senegal and Morocco before returning to the country and joining the Republican Guard in 2018. Some reports also suggest familial ties between Nguema and Bongo.

Meanwhile, crowds of people took to the streets in celebration on Wednesday, raising slogans of “Down with Bongo” and “Down with the PDG!” (Bongo’s Gabonese Democratic Party). “Thousands of Gabonese took to the streets, flying the national flag, singing the national anthem and celebrating with the security forces who overthrew the regime in Libreville,” Leckat said.

“The Gabonese people came to demonstrate their joy at finally seeing this system,

which has multiplied constitutional coups d'états since 1990, finally overthrown."

Speaking to *Democracy Now*, Daniel Mengara, a professor and founder of the Bongo Must Leave movement, noted: "[The people] are very happy that for once the Bongo family has been at least disabled to the point of opening up the possibility of perhaps later on democracy for Gabon... This is a rare opportunity for the Gabonese people to engage in national dialogue that would allow for...after the transition to go into democratic rule."

Gabonese nationals also [gathered](#) outside the country's embassy in Senegal on Wednesday to welcome Bongo's removal from power. However, the protestors were dispersed by Senegalese forces who deployed tear gas. Violence was also reported outside the Gabonese embassy in [Rabat](#), Morocco.

### **Questions surrounding the electoral process**

Saturday's elections had been conducted under an internet blackout, border closures, and a curfew. Foreign journalists were reportedly [not issued](#) press accreditation to cover the election. There were also concerns about the ability of Gabonese citizens living abroad to vote in the election, given that only 14 polling stations in 12 countries had been [approved](#).

The announced results would have given Bongo a third term in office, extending the rule of his family which has been in power in Gabon for the past 56 years.

"The August 26 election was organized in an amateurish way that surprised many. Already, it was a general election, which meant that deputies in parliament, local elected officials and the President of the Republic had to be elected within a sufficiently short timeframe, with an electoral list on which there were deceased persons, and on which there were duplicates," Leckat said.

He added that the list had been put together hastily in a period of just two weeks,

despite the fact that several localities “were, and still remain inaccessible.” Another concern was related to the appointment of the head of the CGE, Michel Stéphane Bonda.

A former advisor to both President Ali Bongo and his father and predecessor Omar Bongo, as well as the former minister delegate for water and forests, Bonda is a close associate of the ousted president, Leckat said.

Another major challenge was related to the voting system itself. In July, the CGE announced a single-ballot system for the legislative and presidential elections, which would in effect mean that a vote for a party’s parliamentary candidate from a particular constituency would automatically mean a vote for that party’s presidential candidate.

The change was rejected by the opposition which argued that it would allow Bongo to unduly benefit from votes given to PDG candidates in the legislative elections. Moreover, not all opposition parties had fielded candidates for the legislative elections. Albert Ondo Ossa himself was also an independent candidate.

Prior to these changes, reforms to Gabon constitution were approved in April, under which all political mandates were reduced to five years (which would make the presidential election take place simultaneously with the parliamentary elections) and the double round voting system was canceled. A term limit for the presidency was removed in 2003.

“Even though it was a question of electing [officials] to two different institutions, we ended up voting for the president and the deputy [for the National Assembly, or the Lower House of parliament] on the same ballot paper, unheard of in a democracy,” Leckat said.

“It is all these elements that prompted the uprising, certainly of the army. And if this

army uprising hadn't taken place, I'm convinced that the Gabonese people would have shown defiance, because they massively voted for the consensus candidate of the opposition [Albert Ondo Ossa]."

Gabon had witnessed violent [protests](#) in the aftermath of the previous presidential elections held in 2016, in which Bongo had won with a slim majority of 49.80% (by 5,500 votes) against his opponent, Jean Ping, who secured 48.23% of the vote share. At least five people were killed according to the government's own estimates.

Members of the armed forces had also mounted a foiled coup attempt in 2019 while Bongo was seeking medical treatment in Morocco.

Even though the Bongo family has amassed vast personal fortunes, Gabon's substantial oil wealth has not translated into an improvement in the living conditions of a large part of the country's population, about one-third of whom are impoverished. The country's [unemployment rate](#) stands at around 30%.

As of August 31, the country remains under curfew from 6pm to 6am. However, the CTRI has since announced the restoration of the internet and broadcasting of international radio and television channels in the country.

The Alternance 2023 platform has [called](#) upon the CTRI to continue the vote counting process, and has expressed willingness to engage in dialogue.

## **International response**

As international responses to the coup continue to trickle in, a call for Bongo's restoration to power is notably absent.

However, in a statement issued on Wednesday, the head of the African Union Commission strongly condemned the "attempted coup" as a "way to resolve its current post-election crisis" and called upon the national army and security forces to

adhere to their republican roles and to guarantee the physical integrity of the deposed president and the members of his family and government.

Following a meeting on August 31, the African Union's Peace and Security Council, currently chaired by Burundi, announced that Gabon's suspension would remain in place "until the restoration of constitutional order in the country."

The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) has also issued a communique condemning "the use of force as a means of resolving political conflict and gaining access to political power." It called for a "rapid return to constitutional order" and indicated that it is waiting for an "imminent" meeting of the Central African Peace and Security Council (COPAX) to discuss the current situation in Gabon and the way forward.

Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, who is the current chair of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), also expressed "deep concern" regarding Gabon's socio-political stability and the "seeming autocratic contagion appearing to spread to other parts of the African continent."

ECOWAS has imposed severe sanctions and threatened a military intervention in Niger in West Africa, where military officers had seized power in a popularly-supported coup on July 26.

Meanwhile, European Union's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell told reporters that Gabon's election had been "plagued by irregularities."

"There are military coups and institutional coups, where you don't need to take up arms, but if I rig an election to seize power, that is also an irregular way to do it," he said.

France, in a statement issued by government spokesperson Olivier Véran, condemned the military coup and reiterated its "commitment to free and transparent

elections,” adding that “the result of the election, when it is known, must be respected.” The Bongo family has held close ties with France—to the extent that Gabon has been considered a “central pillar” and “example par excellence” of *Francafrique*, an enduring economic and political system of control between France and its former colonies.

Gabon is among 14 countries on the African continent that uses the neocolonial CFA Franc currency. France also has about 350-400 troops stationed in Gabon and French companies have historically enjoyed preferential treatment in the country, including in [oil licensing](#).

French company Eramet, which is the world’s largest producer of manganese ore, has resumed mining in Gabon after briefly suspending operations on August 30.

“Gabon has only been able to get rid of its presidential puppet through the intervention of its military. Macron will, once again, have compromised France in supporting the unbearable until the end. Africans are turning the page,” [stated](#) Jean Luc-Melenchon, a left-wing French politician and former member of the National Assembly.

Meanwhile, White House spokesperson John Kirby stated, “It is obviously deeply concerning (to see) yet another country where military officers have taken these dangerous and reckless steps and attempted takeovers of democratically elected governments.” A separate statement from the US State Department noted “with concern, the lack of transparency and reports of irregularities surrounding the election.”

China has called on all relevant parties in Gabon to “resolve differences peacefully through dialogue, and restore normal order as soon as possible.”

UN Secretary General António Guterres firmly condemned the coup in a statement,

noting with “deep concern the announcement of the election results amidst reports of serious infringements of fundamental freedoms.” He called on “all actors involved” to hold an “inclusive and meaningful dialogue.”

