



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# Consequences of the coup in Gabon - Where did the coup plotters find encouragement?



It is challenging to draw a connection between the coup in Niger a month ago and the attempted military coup in Gabon last Wednesday.

Ali Bongo, the president of Gabon, was overthrown by the military and detained. The events, which are still ongoing in Niger, probably encouraged coup plotters in Gabon.

The attempted coup in Gabon indicates that the sub-Saharan African region has become one of the most unstable regions in the world. This was the eighth military coup in West Central Africa in the last 3 years.

As soon as the results showed that he had won the presidential race for the third time with about 64% of the votes, the 14-year rule of President Ali Bongo violently ended.

If a military coup succeeds, it will also represent the end of almost 6 decades of the Bongo dynasty rule, father and son, who kept the country in close alliance with France even after gaining independence in 1960.

## Hesitation about intervention in Niger

The coup plotters in Libreville could have also found encouragement in the reluctance of concerned but unwilling international actors to intervene militarily in Niger.

The military leaders of the 15 West African ECOWAS states recently confirmed that they were ready to intervene in Niger, which is one of their members, but that political support was still lacking.

Gabon is not an ECOWAS member, which

excludes the possibility of military engagement of its members.

But Gabon is part of the 6-member alliance of Central African States (CEMAC), with Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Republic of the Congo and Equatorial Guinea.

This is primarily a trade and financial community, but has experience implementing collective security. Its Force multinationale en Centrafrique (FOMUC) mission replaced the UN mission in the Central African Republic in 2002, where it remained for 6 years.

However, neither this organisation nor any other regional or non-African structure has hinted at a possible military intervention in Gabon.

Concerns and demands to follow the democratically stated will of the people have been arriving from all significant international addresses, including the EU, the US, France, and China.

The Commonwealth has also expressed deep concern. Last year, Gabon joined the Commonwealth as its 55th member, emphasising its separation from long-standing ties to France.

"The Commonwealth Charter is clear that member states must uphold the rule of law and the principles of democracy at all times", said Patricia Scotland, the Commonwealth Secretary-General.

However, as in the early days of the Niger coup, they are all following developments and assessing the prospects of the coup plotters before reaching decisions.

## Are French interests at risk?

Even though the coup plotters in Gabon, unlike their recent predecessors in Niger, have not (yet) shown pronounced anti-French signals, there is no doubt that the motivation for their operation was the systematic reduction of the French military presence in the region.

There are still around 400 French military personnel in Gabon, primarily in Libreville, the capital. It is one of a total of 4 military bases in West Africa, which, according to the new Paris strategy of "balanced partnership", remain in the region, not independently, but under the joint administration of France and the host country.

"Françafrique is a thing of the past", said President Emmanuel Macron last March during his African tour, which he started in Gabon, emphasising that Paris has been changing its previous approach to its former colonies.

Reducing military presence is not followed by the decline in France's economic presence in the region, which Macron made clear during his visit, because France has invested too much in economies across the continent to abandon them.

For the time being, it does not appear as though French economic interests in Gabon are in danger, at least not in the same way they were after the recent coup in Niger.

But one of the largest investors, the mining group Eramet, still suspended its operations "for the safety of staff and the security of operations".

It operates the only railway network in Gabon, and through its local subsidiary, it exploits manganese ore from the Moanda mine, the largest manganese deposit in the world.

The shares of all French companies that have operations in Gabon recorded a significant decline on world stock markets after the news of the coup (from 15 to 20%).

This includes TotalEnergies, which exploits oil in 7 producing fields in Gabon, a member of OPEC and the fourth largest African oil exporter with about 185,000 barrels per day.

## Gabon has so far been immune to terrorism

Unlike Niger, Gabon is not among the countries in the Sahel region exposed to Islamic extremism. Gabon has been at the bottom of the African and global list of committed terrorist acts for years, according to the Global Terrorism Index.

The direct threat of infiltration of militant Islamic groups from the surrounding area is not currently visible in Gabon.

However, similar experiences in the region have shown that there is no better prerequisite for the growth of Islamic extremism than a vacuum in the work of state institutions and violent regime changes.

The coup plotters in Libreville and their supporters on the streets showed no preference for any foreign partner or movement.

There were no Russian flags among the citizens who greeted the news of the coup in

the streets, as was the case on the streets of Niamey recently when President Mohamed Bazoum was ousted.

## The instability in the coup belt suggests the threat of continuation

For regional and continental actors, particularly the African Union, who have yet to develop a successful strategy to address the coup in Niger, the coup in Gabon poses an even more challenging problem. After a month, they were confronted with a fresh challenge.

The events in Central and West Africa in recent years have rightly given the region the name "coup belt", so after the attempted coup in Gabon, few dare to say that the last domino fell with it.

The political instability brought on by widespread corruption, extreme poverty, and a lack of vision has increased the likelihood of more military coups.

In view of Senegal's upcoming presidential elections, which are being planned amid intense political turmoil, and President Macky Sall's recent announcement that he will not run for re-election in the face of public pressure, there are concerns about the course of events in the country.

The absence of international diplomatic intervention only encourages the military commanders in the region even more easily to reach for a violent change of power because the degree of frequency and success of such operations is the highest in the last 50 years or so.