



The Gabonese Election and the Transition from Military Junta to Civilian President



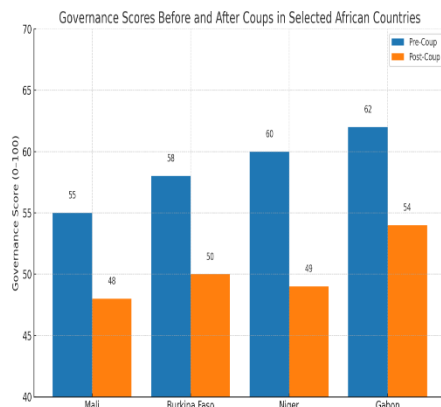
Gabonese military leader, Gen. Brice Oligui Nguema has now become the elected president. Gen. Brice Oligui Nguema was the latest of the military junta to seize power in a series of recent military takeovers in West and Central Africa (Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea and Niger Republic). He is however the first to organize a presidential election and lead the transitional process back to civilian rule after nineteen months of military rule since overthrowing Ali Bongo. Gen. Nguema won the presidential elections with an overwhelming 90.35% of the votes despite

eight candidates contesting the election including Nguema's most prominent opponent Alain Claude Bilie By Nze who served as prime minister under President Ali Bongo. However, the election process and build up to the elections has been marred with controversies, intimidation and political maneuvers. Although an 'Inclusive National Dialogue' was convened in April 2024 to discuss the country's future and reforms, about 200 political parties were reportedly excluded from this dialogue. A new constitution which was drafted and approved via a referendum in November 2024 provided wide-ranging changes that created a leeway for the emergence of Gen. Nguema as president. These key changes including *extending the presidential term to seven years, abolishing the Prime Minister position, and removing the two-round electoral system*. Notably, the new constitution controversially allows the Transitional President to contest the upcoming elections, a move that was initially against the transitional charter. During his election campaign, 50-year-old Nguema promised to diversify the oil-reliant economy and promote agriculture, industry and tourism. Voter turnout was 70.4% according to the interior ministry far higher than the 56.6% in the August 2023 election that led to the military take over and the fall of the Bongo dynasty in a controversial election.

Geo-Political Impact in the Region

The situation in Gabon, particularly the transition process from a military to civilian administration in which the military junta becomes the leading candidate for elections, has potential implications for the Sahel region, which has experienced a series of military takeovers in recent years (Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger). The election of the former military junta could inadvertently legitimize military interventions as a pathway to political power in the region. This might weaken the AU's anti-coup stance and embolden other juntas to follow a similar trajectory. The Gabonese case could

further erode democratic norms in Africa, particularly the principle that power should be transferred through legitimate and transparent elections, not military force. Also, the decision to allow the Transitional President to contest the elections sets a precedent that leaders of other military juntas might seek to emulate, potentially undermining the intended purpose of transitional periods, a neutral return to civilian rule. A perceived lack of genuine democratic transition in Gabon could further destabilize the region (West and Central Africa) by demonstrating that military rule can be a viable route to long-term power, potentially inspiring further coups. While Gabon has moved relatively quickly towards elections compared to some Sahelian countries, the nature of this transition, where the coup leader is the winner, might influence how other juntas frame their own transitions. They might prioritize consolidating power and ensuring their continued leadership over a more inclusive and genuinely civilian-led process.



This chart visually demonstrates the decline in governance performance following military takeovers, reinforcing the concern over democratic backsliding in the region. Gabon's relatively bloodless coup, executed with swift control and followed by limited international sanctions or condemnation, may inadvertently serve as a blueprint for future power seizures.

The AU's muted response to the candidacy of Gabon's Transitional President contrasts with its stronger stance against previous coup leaders contesting elections in other countries. This inconsistency could be interpreted as a weakening of the continental body's principles. The self-proclaimed Alliance of Sahel States (Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) has already shown a reluctance to adhere to calls for swift transitions to civilian rule and has even severed ties with ECOWAS. The Gabonese situation might be viewed by these juntas as further justification for their own extended timelines and potential candidacy of military leaders. Analysts suggest that the focus on unconstitutional changes of government has, at times, overshadowed the need for the AU to address the underlying security and governance issues in the Sahel that contribute to instability and military takeovers. The Gabonese transition needs to be viewed within this broader context.

Conclusion

Gabon's coup is part of a broader pattern of military takeovers in Africa, including in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The success of Gabon's military in seizing power without significant international backlash may embolden similar actions in other countries within the Sahel region. The transition in Gabon raises concerns about the erosion of democratic norms in the region. The military's justification for the coup, citing electoral fraud and governance failures, mirrors narratives used in other recent coups, potentially undermining efforts to promote constitutional governance across the Sahel. The political upheaval in Gabon, culminating in the August 2023 military takeover, is emblematic of a growing trend of unconstitutional power shifts in Africa, particularly within and around the Sahel. This trend already evident in countries such as Mali (2020 and 2021), Chad (2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023), reflects a deeper regional crisis in governance, democracy, and security. The repeated interruption of constitutional rule contributes to a deteriorating democratic culture across the region. Gabon's transition undermines the principle of peaceful power transfer and may further demoralize civil societies already skeptical of electoral integrity. The domino effect threatens to dismantle decades of democratization efforts supported by regional bodies like ECOWAS and the African Union. While Gabon is not geographically part of the Sahel, its political stability has implications for the broader Central and West African security frameworks. The military realignment in

Libreville could affect cooperation on transnational threats, particularly those involving terrorism, arms trafficking, and migration, which are deeply rooted in the Sahel. Moreover, Gabon's pivot might impact regional diplomatic alignments, especially regarding relations with Western powers like France, which has faced growing hostility in Sahelian capitals following coups. Gabon's cordial ties with Paris under the transitional regime stand in stark contrast to the anti-French sentiment in the AES, possibly positioning Libreville as a new strategic partner for European engagement in the region. In many Sahelian countries, the people have welcomed military coups out of frustration with stagnant development, insecurity, and entrenched political elites. Gabon's coup was similarly met with celebrations in Libreville. This cross-border sentiment reinforces a troubling pattern: military rule, at least in the short term, is being perceived as a legitimate corrective measure rather than a regression. France has maintained a relatively positive relationship with Gabon's new leadership. General Nguema's official visit to Paris contrasting with France's strained relations with other military-led governments in the Sahel. The European Union expressed concern that Gabon's coup could contribute to increased instability in the region, highlighting the potential for a domino effect of military takeovers in Africa. Gabon is rich in natural resources, including oil and manganese. The political transition has implications for the management and exploitation of these resources, which are vital for the country's economy and have regional significance.

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