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GABON

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Gabon, an oil-rich country considered to be one of the most stable states in Central Africa, is entering a new era in which the prospects for media freedom and sustainability are anything but certain. In their discussions for the first Media Sustainability Index study for Gabon, panelists said their country oscillates between media liberalization and repression over critical coverage of Gabon's untouchable subjects—President Omar Bongo and his associates. Just months after the panel's discussion, however, Bongo died at age 79, after more than 40 years in power. Elections for a new leader were scheduled for mid-2009.

Beginning with a national convention in 1990 that allowed multi-party democracy and established freedom of the press and other basic liberties, Gabonese media outlets proliferated to the point where today there are more than 60 print publications and a variety of radio and television stations, both private and state-run. Yet the media and their defenders can point to a continuing pattern of retaliation by the government over coverage of Bongo and his entourage, who were frequently accused of corruption, influence peddling, and illicit enrichment.

In one recent example, the government suspended *Tendance Gabon*, a private bi-monthly newspaper, for three months beginning in March 2008 after it republished an article from the French daily *Le Monde* detailing real estate that several African heads of state owned in France. Bongo, the article said, owned 32 residences, including a luxurious Paris townhouse. In the same issue, *Tendance Gabon* also published an editorial criticizing the National Communications Council (NCC), Gabon's media regulator, for not reacting to certain insulting and extremist publications with powerful patrons while swiftly sanctioning other publications.

The NCC justified the suspension of *Tendance Gabon*, saying that by reproducing the article from *Le Monde*, the newspaper "had provided the missing link of what the Gabonese government considered a denigration campaign against President Omar Bongo." The council also stated that *Tendance Gabon* "could not provide evidence" supporting the allegations in *Le Monde*—which were documented by the minutes of the French judiciary—and said it was guilty of plagiarism.

With Bongo gone from the scene, it is unclear whether the running battles between media and government will subside. But as the MSI panelists' discussion make clear, the Gabonese media face many obstacles, which the death of one man—no matter how powerful—cannot remove overnight.

GABON AT A GLANCE

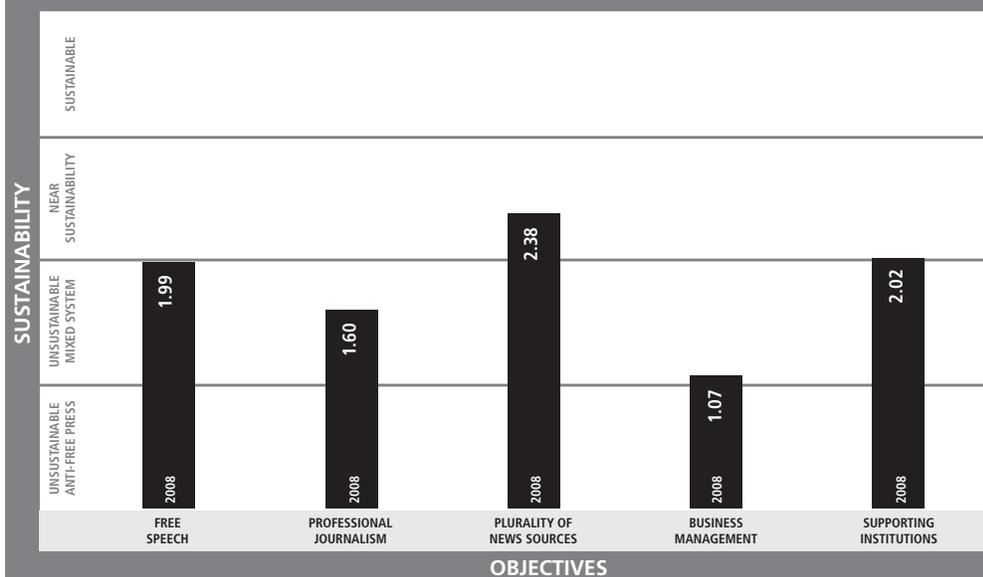
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 1,485,832 (July 2008 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Libreville
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Bantu tribes, including four major tribal groupings (Fang, Bapounou, Nzebi, Obamba); other Africans and Europeans, 154,000, including 10,700 French and 11,000 persons of dual nationality (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Christian 55%-75%, other 25%-45% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** French (official), Fang, Myene, Nzebi, Bapounou/Eschira, Bandjabi (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2007-Atlas):** \$8.876 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008)
- > **GNI per capita (2007-PPP):** \$13,080 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008)
- > **Literacy rate:** 63.2% (male 73.7%, female 53.3%) (1995 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** Interim President Rose Francine Rogombe (since June 10, 2009)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** 7 regularly published newspapers, 13 radio stations, 4 television stations
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** N/A
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Gabonews (private), Internet Gabon (private) (BBC Country Profile)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 145,000 (2007 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: GABON



Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):

Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3):

Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4):

Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Gabon Objective Score: 1.99

The Gabonese constitution establishes freedom of speech and recognizes each citizen's right to freedom of conscience, thought, opinion, speech, communication, and assembly. These rights are guaranteed for all, but they are subordinated to maintenance of public order.

Some panelists noted that the National Convention of Gabon, which was held in April 1990 and paved the way for multi-party politics, had deplored the absence of any press laws, which it blamed for the weakness of the state-run press. The convention recommended that the journalism profession change its status, based on the legislation guaranteeing the freedom of the press, and that an ethical code and a state agency to regulate the media be created. As a result, the NCC was established.

The end of single-party rule in 1990 also signaled the end of the government's monopoly on information and communication. Today, media ownership is spread among the government, political parties, and private citizens.

All the panelists recognized that the current government is aware that the media have an important role in providing the people with information about political, economic, social, and cultural issues. "Before, we could do without it, but not anymore", said Jean Bekale Be Nguema, who manages one of Gabon's two state-run television stations.

While recognizing the importance of Gabon's constitutional guarantees, all the panelists nevertheless deplored the fact that in reality these rights, particularly freedom of speech, are increasingly flouted. Jean Blaise Mengue Menna, managing editor of *La Nation*, said that ever since Bongo gave a speech on December 1, 2007, celebrating his 40 years in power, the country had gradually slid back toward autocracy. For example, Interior Minister André Mba Aubame suspended the activities of several NGOs in January 2008 on the grounds that they had made "political" comments in a press conference. However, one panelist, Désiré Ename, a freelance journalist, suggested the critiques and opinions of these NGOs of the country's development should help decision makers and the government to correct their mistakes and make decisions in the general interest.

Another example of the many pitfalls and restrictions related to press freedom, the panelists said, occurred in October 2007, when the NCC suspended two publications: *La Nation*, a Gabonese daily newspaper, and *Le Gri-Gri International*, a private satirical bi-monthly published in Paris and distributed in Gabon.

According to *La Nation's* Mengue, the newspaper was notified of a NCC hearing in late September 2007 after it published an article headlined "Does Blandine Marundi deserve to be a minister?" which contained denunciations of the minister's opposition to change and lack of experience.

At the same time, the NCC banned the publication and distribution of *Le Gri-Gri International* in Gabon. The officially stated reason was that the last issue had been printed and distributed in Gabon but that the journal had never been registered as a Gabonese press outlet. The Gabonese publisher, *La Voix du Peuple* (VDP), and distributor, Sogapresse, were instructed to stop providing their services to *Le Gri-Gri International* until it was judged to conform to Gabonese regulations.

Panelists noted, however, that the issue in question was censored "for content" by VDP and the edition was not distributed in Gabon. The newspaper's front page had printed an announcement made a few days earlier by Bongo—whom the paper nicknamed "Mullah Omar"—about the upcoming exploitation of iron mines in Belinga, in northeastern Gabon, and described this exploitation as "a Gabonese fraud." The paper voiced concern about pollution and the destruction of the ecosystem as a result of this operation.

"The often unhealthy environment and the disputes among politicians prevent professionals from doing their jobs freely and independently," Mengue said, pointing out that journalists are often harassed. A panelist noted that Claude Ada Mboula, a cameraman for the private channel Tele

LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

Africa, was beaten by police for covering the peaceful rally of the Gabonese NGO coalition against excessive living on April 25, 2008.

Referring to the preferential treatment of some media, Bekale said he believed that while all press outlets are equal before the law, they do not receive equal state subsidies.

The panelists agreed that freedom of the press and journalists' access to information are goals that have yet to be achieved. "What is lacking is the political willpower to eliminate the obstacles that hinder the freedom of the press, improve journalists' working conditions to ensure their independence, and thus allow the people to take part in the public and democratic debate," Ename pointed out.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Gabon Objective Score: 1.60

The wind of democratization that blew through Gabon in the early 1990s not only brought a blooming of political parties and opposition newspapers, it also caused the appearance of what some panelists labeled a new breed of volunteer journalists painfully lacking training and professionalism. These so-called "combat journalists" are still pervasive among opinionated newspapers. At the other end of the spectrum are the "civil servant journalists," who work for the state-run media and often are beholden to those in power.

Order No. 7/93 of 1993 defines the qualifications of journalists and their rights and obligations. Chapter 2, Article 89 states that in the exercise of their activities, professional journalists have complete freedom to gather and use information subject to respect for laws and regulations. Article 90 states that professional journalists are subject to the collective agreement of the private press in terms of their rights and obligations. Journalists employed in the public sector are subject to regulations that apply to state workers. Panelists said the regulations illustrate that journalists in the private press can best practice their profession freely, while those in the public sector are constantly subjected to censorship and their freedom is dramatically limited. For all of them, access to news sources is often difficult, as no law defines how such access should be provided.

During the celebration of International Press Freedom Day in May 2008, Communication Minister Jean Boniface Assélé recognized that "Gabonese communicators often work in difficult conditions while having to observe professional ethics rules." He said the government continues to make efforts to improve this, including a subsidy of XAF 500 million (\$1.1 million) granted to the local written press.

Gabonese journalists try to meet professional standards, Norbert Ngoma said, but they live in an often unfavorable political, economic, legal, social, and cultural environment. His opinion was shared by Annie Chantal Bikeme: "In Gabon, journalists try their best to inform the population despite the difficulties they encounter in the field. Access to official information is still restricted."

Self-censorship exists in Gabon to varying degrees; Mengue said, "Some practice self-censorship, others do not."

Samson Ebans Nkili, a journalist with the Gabonese Press Agency, said: "The journalists' credibility depends on how trustworthy they are to their readers and auditors in general." He said "professional production of complex and balanced news is still lacking" because there is a lack of training opportunities.

Bekale, who manages a government television station, acknowledged that news reports by state media are not always fair. Their treatment of news is subject to the state-enforced communication policy for public media, and salaries do not reflect the work journalists put in. Ename blamed many of the shortcomings of Gabonese media on journalists' low salaries. When journalists are not paid enough to be truly independent, he said, sources of news can easily become sources of influence. "The quality of the press is not satisfactory," Ename said.

Like many African countries, Gabon is far behind the times when it comes to equipment for broadcast media, panelists said. Only the Pan-African radio station, Africa No. 1, and the government-run daily newspaper, *L'Union*, are up to date with new technologies. The Gabon Press Agency, also run by

JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

the government, functions haphazardly after being connected to China's Xinhua News Agency last December.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Gabon Objective Score: 2.38

From the establishment of press freedom in 1990 through liberalization of the broadcast media in the late '90s, the proliferation of media outlets brought competition and variety to the sector.

The origins of this varied media landscape actually go back as far as 1981, when Gabon became the first African country to create an international radio station, Africa No. 1, which resulted from cooperation with France. All the panelists said they were happy that today this pan-African station can be received in FM anywhere in Gabon and in the capitals of most Francophone African countries, as well as in Paris. There are also two state-run radio networks: RTG 1, founded in 1959, and RTG 2, founded in 1977. Several private FM stations complete the Gabonese radio landscape. From abroad, Radio France Internationale (RFI) is broadcast over FM in Libreville, Port-Gentil, and Franceville.

Two state television channels, RTG 1, founded in 1963, and RTG 2, in 1977, are available at no charge. There are also Gabonese private satellite channels, available by subscription, such as TéléAfrica and TV+. In addition, some channels rebroadcast international programming in French and English.

MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE AND OBJECTIVE NEWS.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.

Among the more than 60 written publications that have sprung up since the early '90s, most are opinion journals, while others have been directly created by political parties. The only daily newspaper is the state-run *L'Union*, which was started in 1975 and has a circulation estimated at 20,000. Published by Sonapresse, it has considerable resources, particularly high-performance computer equipment.

The Gabon Press Agency gathers and distributes news throughout the country, and Agence France-Presse and RFI have regional offices in Libreville.

"All these papers and means of communications publish and air diverse news," Ngoma said. "However, their objectivity and reliability is still in contention." Léon Brice Ovono Ndoutoume, of *Gabon Economie* newspaper, said that the problem lies not with the number of media outlets, but with the qualifications of journalists. Increasing the number of training workshops, even creating training schools, is desirable.

Bekale contended, however, that the abundance of media outlets means that Gabonese can determine for themselves which sources are trustworthy. A plurality of news sources, he said, "allows us to make allowances and compare."

Fidel Biteghe, publication manager of *La Tribune*, said that although broadcasting is diverse, news only takes up a small portion of programming. "Programs rather reflect the expectations of the decision-makers and their funding sources instead of taking into account those of the audience. This is also a professional problem that program creators have," Biteghe said.

State media focus on political reports almost exclusively, leaving the rest aside, whatever the importance of the news or event, said Ename, who added that he wished the Gabonese media would favor local productions.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Gabon Objective Score: 1.07

Most panelists agreed that Gabonese media suffer from limited sources of revenue. With a limited advertising market, private media outlets depend rely on the deep pockets of their owners—in some cases, political parties—and on a government subsidy. Bekale said he believes these limited resources prevent media outlets from becoming financially independent and thereby ensuring their journalists' independence.

Ndoutoume said that, "The management of the independent media depends on their sponsors, who are also their main managers. To say that they are well managed businesses would be utopian."

The dearth of advertising is a huge problem, panelists said. "We encounter many difficulties with this because we receive no advertising," said Annie Chantal Bikeme, publisher of the newspaper *Femme d'Aujourd'hui*. Her opinion was shared by Biteghe, who said: "The management of the private media is a major preoccupation, given the modest means. The scarceness of advertising in the written press does not help to set up consistent budgets. The state forces press outlets to become press and communication businesses in order to access subsidies."

Some panelists said subsidies serve to compromise the media's relationship with the government, but Biteghe said that sufficient subsidies could help the quality of news reporting. "Searching for news is costly," he said. "Newspaper sales do not bring in enough income, and the press cannot be efficient in its mission. Hence, there is a need to think about subsidies that would help in obtaining more reliable information."

While the panelists were holding their discussions, the written press publishers' board was almost at war with Asselé, the minister of communications, who wanted to extend the government's annual XAF 500 million subsidy for the printed press to radio, television stations, and on-line media. The subsidy was established in 2005 for the printed press alone. In a press conference held in late September 2008, the publishers' board stated that "the minister's initiative is deliberately meant to generate confusion by lumping together the financial aid to the written press" and another government media fund that had recently been established by law but not implemented.

INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Gabon Objective Score: 2.02

The panelists deplored the absence of supporting organizations that could fund Gabonese media. Ename said that there are publishers associations, such as the Free Press Professionals Association, but that no business associations have been created to encourage and support the press.

The panelists recognized that the country has no media owners groups or broad-based journalist associations. There is an association of sports journalists, and about 20 Gabonese journalists are members of the International Union of French-language Journalists. Mengue pointed out the Communications Professionals Union, which acts as the main union of Gabonese communicators, does not include journalists. Achille Moutsinga, a journalist with the newspaper *Le Temps*, regretted that the few existing associations are not yet involved in the major issues that affect the interests of the media.

Newspaper printing in Gabon is a real challenge, as there is only one reliable printing company, Multipress, which keeps its prices high because of the effective monopoly it has over the Gabonese papers. Some panelists recommended that a second modern printing company be established in Libreville and include all private publishers.

Distribution of print media is also a problem. "Newspapers do not reach the inland territories," Bikeme said. "It's a big issue, and it means that the distribution of the written press is still lacking."

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

Mengue pointed out that while no training centers for journalists are available in Gabon, the cabinet had recently decided to create a Department of Information Science at the Omar Bongo University.

Participant List

Désiré Ename, freelance journalist, Libreville

Blaise Mengue Menna, general manager, *La Nation* newspaper, Libreville

Jean Bekale Be Nguema, reporter, RTG 2, Libreville

Norbert NGOUA Mezui, editor, *Nku'u le Messenger*, Libreville

Annie Chantal Bikene, editor, *Femme d'Aujourd'hui*, Libreville

Fidel Biteghe, publication director, *Tribune*, Libreville

Samson Ebans Nkili, reporter, Gabon Press Agency, Libreville

Léon Brice Ovono, reporter, *Gabon Economie*, Libreville

Achille Moutsinga, reporter, *Le Temps*, Libreville

Hasse Nziengui, program director, RTG1 Radio Television Gabon, Libreville

Patrick Ndutum Ndong, reporter, *L'Ombre*, Libreville

Otembe Nguema, culture reporter and columnist, *L'Union*, Libreville

Moderator & Author

Blaise Mengue Menna, editor, *La Nation*, Libreville

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