

Comparative Coups in Niger and Gabon

Douglas Yates

Posted to The World Orders Forum: 7 September 2023

Douglas Yates is a political scientist with a specialty in African politics and the politics of the oil industry. He serves as a professor of International Relations and African Politics at the American Graduate School in Paris. His publications include *The Scramble for African Oil: Oppression, Corruption and War for Control of Africa's Natural Resources*, and *The Rentier State in Africa: Oil Rent Dependency and Neocolonialism in the Republic of Gabon*.

1. Problems of Insurgency and Dynastic Rule

There are no doubts that the rise in insecurity and declining economic prospects contributed to the coup in Niger. Despite the presence of troops from the US and France, the leadership has been unable to stop insurgent attacks. Attacks by insurgent groups, Al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates, as well as Boko Haram, resulted in thousands of deaths. The large foreign military presence in the country was never well received. France's huge investments in Niger's mining sector also made it particularly suspect. The US drone base made Niger a target for terrorists and increase instability. Many people in Niger believe Russia and its private military contractor, Wagner group, could do a better job of fighting insurgents than Western-backed forces. When France and other European allies withdrew their forces from neighboring Mali, President Bazoum was quick to invite them to Niger. Niger's military leadership denounced this increase in foreign forces. The failure of ECOWAS and the AU to take a firm stance against military power seizures also emboldened the Nigerien military. ECOWAS and the African Union threatened sanctions, but nothing much was done to deter coups. This created an impression that there was no deterrence.¹

The corrupt oil-rentier dynastic regime ruling Gabon under the aegis of French neocolonialism has been an open secret for many decades, and therefore one can only celebrate the recent coup d'état which removed the aged, sick, clinging Ali Bongo from power. The political crisis caused by Bongo's 2018 stroke and the opaque manner in which he continued to wield the reins of power through this close family during his convalescence had caused a variety of reactions during 2020-2022. On the one side were critics who demanded his resignation and the end of the Bongo dynasty's fifty-five-year grip on power, joined by democratic opponents who attempted to find a candidate around whom they might unite in the 2023 presidential elections; on the other side were loyal PDG party members who continued to play an institutional charade of cabinet meetings and rubber-stamp legislation

¹ Olayinka Ajala, "What caused the coup in Niger? An expert outlines three driving factors," (31 July 2023) <https://theconversation.com/what-caused-the-coup-in-niger-an-expert-outlines-three-driving-factors-210721#:~:text=The%20current%20coup%20plotters%20have,inevitable%20demise%E2%80%9D%20of%20the%20country.>

that masked the troubling absence of their party's leader, joined by powerful clansmen (and women) inside the dynasty jockeying for position and wealth in the uncertainty surrounding the patriarch's health and the possibility of his death. Before the coup d'état there was little hope that Ali Bongo would lose his third re-election. With over 80% of the seats in the legislature, ruling party control of regional and municipal governments, an asphyxiating stranglehold on the courts, and a monopoly over public administration, including the security apparatus of the state, big men in the ruling party aspired to maintain their hold on power, and continue to enrich themselves corruptly on the clientist fruits of dynastic rule, rather than completing the constitutional reform to multiparty democracy started in 1991. Worse still, the presidential palace seemed to be preparing a re-election of Ali Bongo only as a vehicle for the transference of power to his eldest son Nouredine Bongo, whose mother Sylvia appeared to be something of the wicked Queen Regent running the country dynastically from behind the scenes.

2. Comparison of the Military Solutions

When comparing these two coups, their similarities are striking. Both are francophone regimes with a long history of collaboration with their former colonial power. Both were toppled this year within months of one another, something of a contagion, or demonstration effect. Rejoicing in the streets of Niamey did not go unnoticed in Libreville. Soldiers in Gabon must have seen that an attempted coup could receive acclamation. Both coups received widespread popular support. There was dancing in the streets. But their differences are as important as their similarities. The justification for the coup d'état in Niger was primarily security, that is, the threat of Islamic insurgents. The justification for the coup d'état in Gabon was primarily political, the threat of continued dynastic rule by a sick ruler and unfit civilian dynasty. Niger's military rulers, lacking legitimacy, adopted an anti-French discourse in order to build popular support for their coup. But Gabon's military rulers, having already achieved their legitimacy from overthrowing an unpopular dynasty, adopted a pro-French discourse. General Brice Oligui Nguema told the French ambassador in Libreville that "the army no longer wanted to be used to kill Gabonese after each election."² Ali Bongo was forced into house arrest in Libreville, while his First Lady and Heir Apparent son were arrested. But France was not blamed for the fifty-five-year reign of the Bongos.

3. The Way Forward

Niger's coup plotters have assumed their military rule unashamedly. Their promise to return power to civilians in the coming years is not credible. Because their domestic legitimacy is premised on anti-French populism, no elections are really required; civilian rule is not to be foreseen any time in the near future. Niger's military rulers, more importantly, are also adopting a foreign policy that seeks an open rupture with the West. Gabon's coup plotters are less open in their desire to establish military rule. Their foreign policy is noticeably pro-Western. For now, my prediction is that the military rulers of Niger will

² Cyril Bensimon, "A Libreville, une « révolution de palais », *Le Monde* (1 septembre 2023) : 2. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/08/31/au-gabon-le-general-oligui-nguema-prend-la-tete-d-une-revolution-de-palais_6187182_3212.html

“civilianize” their regime, following the lead of neighboring Chad. But Gabon will probably have a transitional military regime, eventually holding elections and restoring civilian rule. So now, given the willingness of France and the United States to accept General Nguema’s palace coup, the only questions that remains is will he lead a transition to civilian rule, hold elections, refuse to present himself for office, or will he become the next member of the Bongo clan to rule this rentier state? General Nguema is a cousin of Ali Bongo, so in some ways, this could be considered a form of dynastic succession. But Gabon is a republic. There is no constitutional framework for *legitimate* dynastic succession.³

³ Douglas Yates, “Dynastic Rule in Syria and North Korea: Nepotism, Succession, and Sibling Rivalry,” *International Political Science Review* 43(3) <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0192512120978562>