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Gabon Faces Bongo's Disastrous Legacy

By Alex Perry

As Gabon begins a month of mourning and condolences pour in for President Omar Bongo, the world's longest serving President, who died on Monday at 73 in his 42nd year in power, it's worth remembering that Bongo was precisely the kind of leader Gabon, and Africa, could have done without. Gabon has a tiny population (1.4 million) and vast oil reserves, and after four decades of exporting hundreds of billions of dollars of crude, the biggest testament to the corruption and ineptitude of Bongo's rule is that he somehow contrived not to turn his country into an African Kuwait.

A third of all Gabonese still live on less than \$2 a day, and as the oil fields begin to dry up, Bongo's subjects are facing up to the reality that he sacrificed the country's future to fund his own fantastically opulent lifestyle. The government has made no effort to build alternative industries that might replace oil when it runs out. Yet at the time of his death from cancer, in a clinic in Barcelona, Bongo was facing French allegations of embezzling hundreds of millions of dollars in public funds. ([See pictures of Africa.](#))

The investigation, carried out by a French magistrate responding to a lawsuit filed by the anticorruption watchdog Transparency International, has established that the Bongo family owns at least 33 luxury properties in France worth a total of \$190 million, including a Paris villa bought in 2007 for \$26 million and a Paris mansion bought the same year for a further \$25 million. That last pile was officially bought by Bongo's two children, Omar Denis and Yacine Queenie, who were 13 and 16 at the time. The family, through Bongo, consistently denied corruption, although not that they owned the properties.

This was not the first time Bongo had been exposed. In 1999, an investigation by the U.S. Senate into Citibank estimated that the Gabonese President held \$130 million in the bank's personal accounts, money the Senate report said was "sourced in the public finances of Gabon." Earlier last decade, a French inquiry into the state-owned oil firm Elf-Aquitaine named Bongo as the beneficiary of millions of dollars in slush funds. ([See pictures of the global financial crisis.](#))

Bongo was far from the only postcolonial African head of state to take his country's riches as a personal

reward for the burdens of office. The French-property portfolios of two others — Denis Sassou-Nguesso of Congo Brazzaville and Teodoro Obiang of Equatorial Guinea — are also under investigation, and the French have made inquiries into the assets of Jose Eduardo dos Santos of Angola and Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso. Like Bongo, all have denied any wrongdoing. But Bongo was one of the greediest and, coming to power at 31 in 1967, just seven years after Gabon's independence, one of the first. As such, he set and maintained the catastrophically low standard for African leadership that would ensure that a continent bursting with natural resources would remain the poorest and most war-ravaged place on earth for the ensuing four decades.

The President's disastrous legacy is only too apparent in Gabon's two main cities, the capital Libreville and the economic center of Port-Gentil. Dealerships selling Land Rovers and Hummers (to negotiate all the giant potholes) thrive, while hypermarkets sell \$400 bottles of wine and the city's restaurants and bars serve more champagne per capita than Paris. But the riches enjoyed by a few have made Libreville and Port-Gentil among the most expensive on earth. Despite its large size and seas teeming with fish, almost all food is imported from Europe, entrepreneurialism has all but evaporated, and the majority of Gabonese survive on the margins in ramshackle slums. On a visit to the capital in 2007, I found a community of thousands living on a rubbish tip behind one hypermarket, feeding themselves on the food thrown out for being past its sell-by date. Bongo, meanwhile, could be seen overhead twice a day, flying the few kilometers in the presidential helicopter from his presidential mansion to his office, then back again in the evening. ([Read "The Enrichment of Africa's French Allies."](#))

Bongo set the paradigm for Africa in other ways too. What money he did spend on Gabon went on white-elephant prestige construction projects — a raft of new government buildings and a \$2 billion transnational railway — which, when oil prices dipped, were funded by debt that spiraled out of control and threatened to bankrupt the country. And in politics, Bongo fixed elections for himself and bought off political opposition with money or power — despite its small size, Gabon has more than 40 Cabinet Ministers — or worse. Several opposition members were killed in the 1970s. In 1990, the mysterious death of opposition leader Joseph Redjambe sparked riots. And late last year, two journalists and three civil-society leaders investigating Bongo's finances were arrested. In February, the U.S. State Department classified the human-rights record of Bongo's Gabon as "poor" and listed such problems as "limited ability of citizens to change their government; use of excessive force, including torture ... arbitrary arrest and detention ... restrictions on freedom of speech, press, association, and movement ... widespread government corruption."

There is hope that Bongo's death may help set a new pattern for Africa, opening the way for a new era of reform and shared prosperity. Across the continent, the old "Big Men" dinosaurs are dying off. Gone are Idi Amin of Uganda, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaïre, Hastings Banda of Malawi and Charles Taylor of Liberia. Those that remain are precariously long in the tooth: Libya's Muammar Gaddafi has been in power for 39 years, while Dos Santos of Angola and Obiang of Equatorial Guinea have ruled for 29 and Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe for 28. Sadly, for Gabon, a fresh start is far from assured. In another move also widely imitated across Africa, Bongo tried to ensure that his family's hold on power would survive

him. His daughter Pascaline was his chief of staff; his son Ali is Defense Minister. They have consistently denied all allegations of corruption. Both are believed to want to succeed their father.

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