

Gabon army deployed before official result of election is announced

Residents in capital stockpiling food and staying indoors in anticipation of repeat of violence that followed disputed 2009 poll

Ruth Maclean in Dakar

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Police and the army have been deployed on the streets of Libreville, the capital of Gabon, as tensions rise before the announcement of the result of a fraught election in which both sides have claimed victory.

If the main opposition candidate, Jean Ping, and analysts are correct, the ruling Bongo family's half-century in power is about to end.

In the seaside capital residents stockpiled food on Tuesday and tried to stay indoors, anticipating a repeat of the violence after the disputed 2009 election.

On Sunday, Ping said: "I am elected. I am waiting for the outgoing president to call me to congratulate me." He repeated this claim on Monday.

However, he was not the only one claiming victory.

"Be confident, great things await us," the incumbent president, Ali Bongo, told supporters, following remarks that he would calmly await the announcement of the national election commission.

Bongo took over from his father, Omar, who was Africa's longest-ruling president when he died in 2009. His Gabonese Democratic party (PDG) had been widely expected to win another term until just a week before the election when the main opposition parties formed a last-minute coalition, uniting behind Ping, who was once very close to the Bongo family.

Ping was foreign minister under "Papa Bongo". He has two children from his relationship with the late president's daughter Pascaline.

In tactics similar to those used by the anti-Barack Obama "birther movement" in the US, Ping had accused Ali Bongo of not being Omar's biological son, but an adopted Nigerian refugee, which would disqualify him as a presidential candidate. He also called the incumbent president a "genocidaire", a thief and a pyromaniac in a Facebook post that led to Bongo opening proceedings against him. Ping reacted by saying that he had lodged a case against Bongo at the international criminal court in The Hague.

Official international observers said Bongo had had an advantage during the election, through his greater access to money and the media.

"I congratulate Gabonese voters who expressed their democratic will in a process whose management lacked transparency," the European Union's Mariya Gabriel said, adding that the

electoral commission had failed to provide the interested parties with essential information such as the electoral roll or list of polling stations.

Those remarks prompted Bongo's spokesman to accuse the observers mission of overstepping its mandate. Alain-Claude Nze said: "This mission was looking into things that had nothing to do with this election."

Analysts said they expected the electoral commission to declare Bongo the winner.

François Conradie, the head of research at NKC African Economics, said: "Incumbency isn't what it used to be, and Ping has run a good campaign. Bongo depended entirely on his PDG network, which he has, a bit ironically, weakened by cleaning up government, so he has less to hand out. That's a big part of the reason so many PDG operators are now opposition."

Former colonial power France's ruling Socialist party surprised observers by declaring early on: "First estimates indicate that the outgoing president, Ali Bongo, will be beaten by Jean Ping ... A changeover would be a sign of good democratic health and an example."

Two parliamentarians from tPresident François Hollande's party, Jean-Marie Bockel and Jean-François Mancel, went even further, congratulating Ping for winning the election.

"The ingratitude. How many Bongo millions went to Flanby's campaign?" said Conradie, referring to Hollande by one of his nicknames.

Omar Bongo enjoyed strong links to France and was known as a "pillar of Françafrique" - the term for an underhand network of influence, money and power between France and its former colonies in Africa.

But France has been less friendly towards his son: Ali Bongo's chief of staff was arrested last year in Paris in connection with an investigation into corruption.

Last year, tapes of Bongo's conversations with Michel Tomi, a controversial Corsican businessman known as the "last of the Godfathers" were leaked to the French investigative website Mediapart. They suggested that Bongo had received luxury watches, vehicles and trips in private jets in return for his patronage.

He announced last year that he would give up his share of the inheritance from his father, declaring that all Gabonese citizens were the heirs of Omar Bongo.

Gabon is one of Africa's richest countries, but the majority of its citizens do not enjoy the benefits of its great oil wealth, with a fifth living on less than \$2 a day. Both Bongo and Ping have promised to tackle poverty, which has been exacerbated by a fall in oil prices in recent years.

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