



Gabon

Gabon: Introduction

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Chart 1: Political map of Gabon

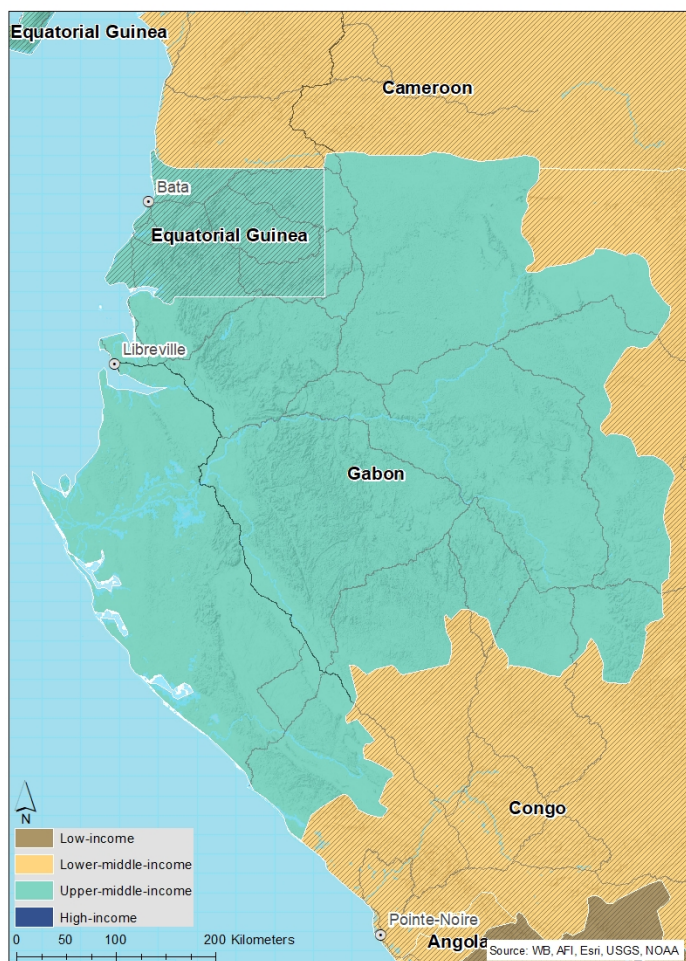


Chart 1 is a political map of Gabon.

Gabon is an upper-middle-income country rich in natural resources that lies on the equator, along the west coast of Central Africa. The country covers an area of about 270 000 km² with an estimated population of 2.5 million people in 2023. Gabon is bordered by Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon to the north, the Republic of the Congo to the east and south, and the Gulf of Guinea to the west. The islands of Sao Tomé and Príncipe are situated off the coast.

Gabon has a tropical climate, with year-round high temperatures and humidity. **Precipitation** is abundant and spread almost throughout the year, typically ranging from 1 500 mm to 3500 mm per year. The country has a single wet season between October and May, with a mean monthly rainfall of 200250 mm. Gabon's **natural resource wealth** includes timber, manganese, natural gas and crude oil. Forests cover 85% of the country's landmass, making it the second-largest forest area in Africa. There are four ecoregions: the Atlantic Equatorial Coastal forest, Central African mangroves, the Gulf of Guinea central region and the northwestern Congolian lowland forest. Gabon's capital and largest city is Libreville located along the Atlantic coast in the northwest. The official language is French, and the currency in use is the Central African CFA franc.

The Kingdom of Orungu was formed in Gabon by the 18th century and became a powerful trading centre, mainly due to the slave trade. Since its **independence** from France in 1960, the sovereign state of Gabon has had four presidents. Elected

in 1961, the first president, Léon Mba, was overthrown by a coup d'état in 1964 before being restored to power by France. In 1967, judged unfit to govern, he was replaced by Omar Bongo.

Despite the introduction of a multi-party system in the early 1990s, the organisation of elections and a new democratic constitution, Omar Bongo and his Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG) kept firm control over Gabon. At his death, the son, Ali Bongo, succeeded him as head of the country in 2009. In September 2023, after a contested election, the long reign of the Bongo family at the head of Gabon was interrupted by a coup d'état, setting up a transition government led by Brice Oligui Nguema, former head of the presidential guard.

Since the beginning of the transition, a national dialogue has been organised to rebuild the institutions, lay the foundations for a new constitution, and set the framework for the 2025 presidential and legislative elections. The latter are due to take place on **12 April 2025**, earlier than initially planned. The draft constitution was adopted by a popular **referendum** in November 2024. The constitutional revisions address dynastic rule by setting presidential term limits and banning family members of a sitting president from running for office. However, despite these advances, **criticism** persists as to the true nature of this transition and its real capacity to break with the old system and lead to civilian rule in 2025. The president of the transition officially announced his intention not to run in the next elections, and this could pave the way for more open competition.

Although the coup d'état was enthusiastically welcomed locally, it was condemned by both the **Economic Community of Central African States** (ECCAS) and the **African Union** (AU) as a violation of the principles of both institutions. As a result, Gabon was suspended from both, before being reinstated by ECCAS in March 2024.

In December 2024, **ECCAS** announced that it would maintain Gabon's suspension until constitutional order was restored. At the same time, the bloc sent a positive signal by referring to the "peaceful and inclusive" nature of the coup and by reversing its decision to move its headquarters to Malabo.

Abundant petroleum reserves and foreign direct investment in the oil sector turned Gabon into one of the most prosperous countries in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of GDP per capita.

Gabon's **oil industry** started gaining attention even before independence. In 1931, several oil deposits were discovered in regions neighbouring the capital Libreville. In 1975, Gabon became a full member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). The country withdrew its membership in 1995 but rejoined the organisation in 2016. In 2021, Gabon also rejoined the Extractives Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), from which it was **not suspended** despite the military coup.

Gabon is Africa's **seventh-largest oil producer** and a net oil exporter although it only plays a minor role in global oil markets. In 2023, **Gabon's share** of OPEC members' crude oil exports stood at 1.04%, the second lowest after Equatorial Guinea.

Crude **oil production** in Gabon averaged 233.10 barrels per day (bpd) from 1973 until 2024. According to **OPEC data**, in 2023 it stood at 223 bpd. Due to the natural depletion of mature oil fields, the transition government is developing its offshore, deep-water resources to achieve a target of doubling oil production to 500 000 bpd by 2025. Offshore resources account for more than 70% of Gabon's about 2 billion barrels of proven reserves, and recent **offshore oil discoveries** are expected to fuel production growth in the country.

In addition to the oil industry, Gabon possesses abundant primary materials and has potential for agricultural growth, developing the fishing industry and tourism sector development. Other notable **exports** aside from crude petroleum include manganese ore, sawn wood, veneer sheets and refined petroleum.

Gabon is currently classified as an upper-middle-income country by the [World Bank](#). However, as is the case with many of its oil-producing African peers, its resource wealth has not translated into inclusive growth and sustainable development for its population. Therefore, on many development indicators it is not aligned with the average of its income peer group. In the absence of economic diversification and exclusionary economic governance, many [development challenges](#) persist. About one-third of the population still lives in poverty, inequality is entrenched and the dependence on food imports is growing. The economy is vulnerable to external shocks, and economic growth does not lead to sustainable job creation. Unemployment is high, in particular among young people, a problem that is compounded by the high level of informality. Moreover, infrastructure gaps, poor governance and an unattractive business environment [hold the country back](#).

The transition government, other than ensuring the return to democratic rule, needs to set the conditions to gradually reverse Gabon's record of decades of poorly managed oil wealth, insufficient inclusion and stagnant incomes and do the groundwork to achieve fiscal sustainability.

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Mustapha Jobarteh joined the ISS in January 2022 as a Senior Researcher in the African Futures and Innovation programme in Pretoria. Before joining ISS, Mustapha was a senior lecturer and Head of the Department of Economics and Finance at the University of the Gambia and a research fellow with the Center for Policy, Research and Strategic Studies. His interests include macroeconomics, international trade and econometric modelling. Mustapha has a PhD in economics from Istanbul Medeniyet University, Istanbul, Turkey.

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