

Relentless Democratic Backsliding in Central Africa

Overview

The resource-rich region of Central Africa has historically been home to some of the most enduring authoritarian regimes on the African continent. For example, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea, Paul Biya of Cameroon and Denis Sassou Nguesso of the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville) are currently the three longest-serving African heads of state, with 45, 42 and 38 years in power respectively. Unsurprisingly, there were no hints of a democratic opening in any of these countries in 2024.

Civic space is shrinking in the Central African Republic (CAR), where a constitutional referendum abolished presidential term limits and strengthened Faustin-Archange Touadéra's grip on power.¹ Chad's transition to civilian rule has raised skepticism. The military junta staged a referendum in December 2023,² paving the way for its leader General Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno to run in the presidential [election](#) he won decisively this year in May.³ Meanwhile, in Gabon, more than a year since the end of the five-decade-long Bongo dynasty, citizens are growing impatient with the slow pace of reforms⁴ promised by the transitional president, who hastily ordered the payment of several months of overdue salary arrears⁵ for civil servants ahead of the 16 November constitutional [referendum](#) that cleared the path for a return to civilian rule in 2025.⁶ Cameroonians are preparing for the 2025 presidential election in a tense climate, with President Paul Biya expected to seek an eighth term.⁷ In neighboring Equatorial Guinea,

restrictions on freedom of assembly, coupled with the [intimidation](#) of civil society leaders, particularly human rights activists, continued in 2024.⁸ The start of the new year in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) coincided with the second inauguration of President Félix Tshisekedi, reelected in December 2023 with more than 70% of the vote in another contentious election.⁹ Unlike his first term, he kicked off his new mandate with a comfortable parliamentary majority. However, his consolidation of power has not been without blemishes, with the regime targeting journalists, civil society activists and political opponents throughout the year.¹⁰ All these examples highlight a pattern of weakening democratic norms in Central Africa.

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Social Upheaval and Curtailment of Civic Space

Protests and social unrest are on the rise all over the region. In February 2024, tensions escalated in Chad when government forces clashed with supporters of the opposition Socialist Party without Borders (PSF) in the capital, N'Djamena. The violence left several dead, including that of PSF leader Yaya Dillo Djérou, considered the main rival of transitional president Mahamat Déby in the lead-up to the presidential election. This episode of political instability came just a month after

1 Freedom House. (2024). Freedom in the World 2024: Central African Republic

2 Ibid.

3 Njie, P., & Armstrong, K. (2024, May 10). Chad's military ruler wins poll. BBC.

4 Obangome, G.W. (2024, August 31). Gabon marks year since 'coup of liberation' with celebrations, reform pledges. Reuters.

5 Payment of overdue salary arrears: How to bribe the Gabonese with their own money, while increasing the deficit. (2024, November 14). Gabon 2025 Blog.

6 Goma, Y.L. (2024, November 16). Gabon votes yes on new constitution a year after the military seized power. The Associated Press.

7 Questioning Biya's health now illegal as speculation grows on absent President. (2024, October 15). Africa Confidential.

8 Colomer, M. (2024, November 4). Suspension: the price to pay in Equatorial Guinea for being a human rights lawyer. El País.

9 Sematumba, O., & Moncrieff, R. (2024, January 26). DR Congo: A Full Plate of Challenges after a Turbulent Vote. International Crisis Group.

10 Senga, J.M. (2024, September 26). DRC President Felix Tshisekedi must be held accountable for human rights violations. Daily Maverick.

the appointment of Succès Masra, an opposition leader who returned from exile in the United States in 2023, as prime minister.¹¹ Masra ran in the presidential election but only received 18.53% of the vote. The opposition alleged electoral irregularities and called for protests, prompting security forces to deploy across N'Djamena to maintain order.¹²

In mid-July 2024, residents of Annobón, the smallest province in Equatorial Guinea, organized peaceful demonstrations to voice their anger over environmental damage caused by explosions linked to the local infrastructure projects of Moroccan company SOMAGEC. In response to the protests, the government ordered the internet and mobile telecommunications to be cut off on 20 July. The blackout, which lasted several weeks, is a blatant manifestation of restrictions on freedoms of information and of assembly in the small oil-rich nation.¹³

Throughout the year, the CAR government's handle of dissent has been harsh. In March 2024, Crépin Mbolli Goumba, a prominent political opponent, was arrested and detained in a facility notorious for human rights abuses.¹⁴ This incident was perceived as a warning to other activists and opposition members. In April, security forces [cracked down](#) on citizens protesting the high cost of living.¹⁵ These developments illustrate the CAR's ongoing challenges in balancing governance, economic stability and respect for civil liberties

The quality of democratic governance in the DRC has been worrisome in 2024, with an alarming increase in

the [targeting](#) of human rights defenders¹⁶ and political opponents. The most significant case of political persecution in DRC this year is perhaps Seth Kikuni, who is being accused of inciting civil disobedience and spreading false information.¹⁷ Considered an ally of Moïse Katumbi, President Tshisekedi's biggest rival and the runner-up in the last presidential election, Kikuni was arrested on 2 September by the infamous National Intelligence Agency (ANR) and detained in a secret location for several weeks before being transferred to the notorious Makala prison where his trial began on 23 October.¹⁸ The DRC is therefore ending 2024 in a dire political climate exacerbated by the president's determination to [change](#) the constitution.¹⁹ Given the size and influence of the DRC, its democratic decline bodes ill for the rest of the region.

Impending Dynastic Successions in the Region

For the past few years, the heads of state of Congo-Brazzaville and Equatorial Guinea have been [grooming](#) their sons for a greater leadership role.²⁰ There were clear signs of dynastic succession in both countries in 2024. In the case of Congo-Brazzaville, the influence of Denis Christel Sassou Nguesso, the president's son, has grown considerably since he joined the cabinet in 2021 as Minister of International Cooperation and Public-Private Partnerships. The appointment of General King Obami Itou, one of his closest allies, as the new chief of the national police is an indication that the security apparatus is being reshuffled in anticipation of a dynastic presidential succession.

11 Lawal, S. (2024, February 24). Why is Chad boiling over ahead of long-awaited elections — and what's next?. Al Jazeera.

12 Kindezka, M. E. (2024, May 16). Chad deploys combat-ready troops as post-election violence spikes. VOA.

13 KeepItOn: Equatorial Guinea authorities must end internet shutdown and other human rights abuses in Annobón. (2024, August 13). Access Now.

14 Nantulya, C.K. (2024, March 18). Opposition Leader in Court in Central African Republic Detention in Police Premises Notorious for Abuse Sends Chilling Message to Critics. Human Rights Watch.

15 Domia-Leu, R.S. (2024, Avril 13). Central African Republic: Protests in Bangui against high cost of living, taxes and power cuts. Radio France International.

16 Jackson, S. (2024, February 16). Tshisekedi 2.0 era opens with wave of repression in DRC. The Africa Report.

17 Kamale, J.Y. (2024, September 25). Protesters in Congo call for the release of political prisoners, including 3 top opposition figures. The Associated Press.

18 Trial of opponent Seth Kikuni begins before the Kinshasa-Gombe peace court. (2024, October 23). Radio Okapi.

19 Banchereau, M. (2024, October 24). Congo's president announces plans for a new constitution. Opposition worried about term limit change. The Associated Press

20 Melly, P. (2021, May 29). Africa's political dynasties: How presidents groom their sons for power. BBC News.

In Equatorial Guinea, the president has conferred considerable power upon his eldest son, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mangué, commonly known as “Teodorín,” who has been serving as vice president for more than a decade. Teodorín is increasingly taking on more prominent roles, including representing the country in international forums and overseeing significant government initiatives.

For instance, in November, his influence over domestic affairs was evident when he ordered the installation of surveillance cameras²¹ in government offices in the wake of a highly publicized sex [scandal](#) involving a senior finance ministry official.²² These developments underscore a trend of dynastic succession in the region and give citizens reason to be concerned considering that there are precedents for such scenarios in Gabon, Chad and Togo.

The Corrosive Effect of Disinformation

Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns have significantly impacted the state of democracy in Central Africa in 2024. These efforts are typically designed to undermine democratic institutions and shore up authoritarian regimes. In relation to disinformation in the region, Russia is the dominant force, with the CAR being the epicenter of its campaigns. Russia has been actively involved in CAR through the Wagner Group, which has deployed close to 2,000 mercenaries to fight rebels and protect the regime in exchange for privileged access to raw minerals.²³ It also undertaken a succession of disinformation campaigns, training

government spokespersons, local journalists and bloggers in techniques designed to enhance local support for the regime and stir animosity towards the West and the UN peacekeeping mission. These efforts were therefore vital in boosting President Faustin-Archange Touadéra’s popularity, while ensuring his 2020 reelection and removal of term limits in 2023.²⁴

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In Chad, disinformation campaigns have also been utilized to disseminate anti-West narratives and manipulate public opinion.²⁵ Three Russian men were [detained](#) in Chad in September and one of them was identified as Maxim Shugaley, an EU and US-sanctioned political operator with close ties to the Wagner Group and its late founder Yevgeny Prigozhin. Shugaley has a well-documented track record in

disinformation and election interference in Africa.²⁶ In a nutshell, the strategic deployment of disinformation by external actors like Russia²⁷ and China²⁸ in Central Africa poses significant challenges to the development and sustainability of democratic governance in the region because this practice clouds the judgment of local populations for the benefit of the ruling elite and its foreign accomplices. In other words, as the exposure to anti-West rhetoric intensifies and permeates every section of society, it is expected that a large number of citizens in the affected countries will start questioning the merits of democracy.

Conclusion

In 2024, Central Africa’s intensifying democratic backsliding is driven by a blend of entrenched klep-

21 Equatorial Guinea orders crackdown on sex in government offices after videos leaked. (2024, November 5). Reuters.

22 Zane, D. & Silva, I. (2024, November 9). Massive sex tape leak could be a ploy for power in central Africa. BBC News.

23 Thoms, S. (2023, June 25). Russia’s Wagner Group: Where is it active? DW News.

24 Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa. (2024, March 13). The Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

25 Tracking Russian Interference to Derail Democracy in Africa. (2024, May 8). The Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

26 3 Russian Men Arrested in Chad, Foreign Ministry Says. (2024, September 24). The Moscow Times.

27 The Kremlin’s Efforts to Spread Deadly Disinformation in Africa. (2024, February 12). US Department of State.

28 Eisenmann, J. (2023, March 16). China’s Media Propaganda in Africa: A Strategic Assessment. United States Institute of Peace.

ocracy, rising dynastic succession, suppression of civic freedoms and foreign-sponsored disinformation campaigns. The region's authoritarian leaders continue to manipulate political systems and limit reforms, using security apparatuses and constitutional changes to prolong their rule. Without adequate support for local civil society and substantial international engagement to hold leaders accountable, the hope for genuine democratic transformation in Central Africa will remain fragile, threatening the stability and aspirations of its people. The presidential elections in Cameroon, Gabon and the Central African Republic in 2025 are not only an opportunity to restore citizens' confidence in democratic processes, but also to reverse the region's current trajectory.

