

BONGO DOIT PARTIR



Office of the President

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Sunday, March 7, 2010

Re: Urgent Call to Cancel Meeting with Ali Bongo Ondimba

Dear Mrs. Secretary of State:

Having become aware of your plan to grant the honor of an official meeting to Gabonese despot Ali Bongo Ondimba, the heir to the 42-year-old regime of Omar Bongo Ondimba, I write in great emergency to request, in the name of the Gabonese people, that you do not meet with the dictator.

As a matter of fact, meeting with Ali Bongo Ondimba would constitute an unacceptable move by the United States, as this would condone the reign of dictatorship in Gabon and the continuation of human right abuses in a country that has been ruled by the same family for 42 years. In fact, with Ali Bongo succeeding his father following rigged elections on August 30, 2009, Gabon is now in a situation where it will potentially be ruled by the same family for more than 72 years. Omar Bongo reigned for 42-years since 1967 and with no statutory nor constitutional limit to his inherited presidency, his son Ali Bongo Ondimba is also poised to reign for life. He is certainly young enough to stay in power for the next 30 years. This would usher the Republic of Gabon into an era of quasi-monarchical rule by the same family and nothing guarantees that Ali Bongo will not, in turn, as his own father did, prepare one of his own sons for succession to ensure that Gabon continues to remain the private property of one family.

Dear Mrs. Secretary of State,

Gabon is far from being a democracy. Multiparty presidential elections are, indeed, held since 1993, but these have been so traditionally rigged by the regime that there is no hope that the Gabonese people will ever be able to change their leaders through peaceful and democratic means. In fact, in its annual reports on Human Rights, the State Department's own Web site has consistently described Gabon as a country "dominated by a strong presidency and the Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG), which has held power since 1968." The reports have further described the country as one in which the "human rights record remained poor," with "limited ability of citizens to change their government; use of excessive force, including torture toward prisoners and detainees; harsh prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention; an inefficient judiciary susceptible to government influence; restrictions on the right to privacy; restrictions on freedom of speech, press, association, and movement; harassment of refugees; widespread government corruption; violence and societal discrimination against women, persons with HIV/AIDS, and noncitizen Africans; trafficking in persons, particularly children; and forced labor and child labor."

I myself, after creating the "Bongo Doit Partir" (Bongo Must Go) movement in 1998, was banned from entering the country for 11 years as Omar Bongo personally prevented the delivery of my Gabonese passport. Following his death in June 2009, I was able to go to Gabon during the presidential interim period mandated by the Constitution, but was arbitrarily banned from running for the country's presidency by the Constitutional Court. This is because the regime knew that, unlike the 23 other candidates, some of whom had been fabricated by the regime itself, my political discourse was likely to raise the real questions and cause a popular insurrection such as is currently being waged in Iran by those who believe that the only way of undoing the Iranian dictatorship is through the street and popular uprising, if not a military coup. I believe that if the United States has supported the popular insurrection in Iran by populations eager for democratic change, it should also support such a possibility in Gabon.

This situation in Gabon has not changed with the presidency of Ali Bongo Ondimba, Mrs. Secretary of State. In fact, the situation is expected to worsen since Mr. Ali Bongo, despite a whole litany of empty and incoherent announcements which he has called “reforms,” is highly unpopular and has not touched on the institutional status quo that fraudulently eased him into power thanks to the constitutional manipulations inherited from his father. Such manipulations have consistently and systematically adulterated the 1991 Constitution promulgated by the National Conference of 1990, a constitution that not only reinstated multiparty politics in Gabon, but also limited the presidential term of office to a 5-year term limit renewable once for a maximum of ten years. It also provided for the need for a run-off election should none of the candidates get 50,01% of the vote in the first round of voting. Omar Bongo changed all that, making it possible for himself to be reelected into office for life, even with a minority of the vote. Gabon’s president basically could actually be elected into office with as little as 10% of the vote. And with the media, the army, the treasury, the parliament and the courts firmly under the control of the presidency, it is unlikely real democracy will ever be established in Gabon with the Bongo family in power. Ali Bongo is not likely to change the Constitution back to, at least, what it was in 1991, as he knows he could not survive in power without a constitution that is essentially tailored to his inability to get democratically elected. His presidency, just like that of his father is simply, therefore, a fraud.

Ali Bongo himself is as corrupt as his father was. As a matter of fact, he was recently implicated in various corruption scandals, including recent February 2010 report and findings by the United States Senate’s Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations (<http://levin.senate.gov/senate/statement.cfm?id=322089>). The Senate found that, in 2006, Mr. Ali Bongo had given \$25 million of Gabon’s money to his now former wife Inge Collins Bongo for the purchase of a \$25 million mansion in Malibu, California. In 2006, Mr. Ali Bongo and his father Omar Bongo also “hired a U.S. lobbyist, Jeffrey Birrell, to buy U.S.-made armored vehicles and to obtain U.S. government permission to buy six C-130 military cargo aircraft from Saudi Arabia to support his regime.” This report echoes the 1999 investigation by the same Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, which had found that Omar Bongo was depositing huge amounts of Gabon’s money (some \$130 million) in accounts held at the Citibank of New York. These sums were for personal use and had apparently been illegally siphoned out of the country’s treasury. Various other inquiries have determined that Omar Bongo often illegally allocated himself close to 10% of the Gabonese budget annually, and was receiving annual bribes of 50 million Euros (\$68 million) from the French oil company Elf-Aquitaine. In 2005, Omar Bongo even paid Jack Abramoff, a now convicted U.S. lobbyist, \$9 million for the opportunity of a photo op with George W Bush.

The U.S. Senate’s 2010 report is not, therefore, mincing its words when it describes Ali Bongo and his deceased father in the following terms: “Omar Bongo, President of Gabon for 41 years until his death last year, and his eldest son, Ali Bongo, Minister of Defense until he took his father’s place as President of the country [...] are notorious for accumulating massive wealth while in office in a country known for poverty.” The system of corruption and money laundering which Ali Bongo inherited from his father is still pretty much intact. Worse, Gabon is an oil-and-minerals-rich country with a per-capita income which the CIA World Factbook rates at close to \$14,000 (many times higher than those of China and India), yet 60% of the population still lives under the poverty line, and the country lacks basic infrastructure in the form of decent hospitals and roads. Meanwhile, the Bongo family owns 39 properties in France worth \$200 million, including 70 bank accounts and million-dollar collection automobiles. This is just in France alone.

Dear Mrs. Secretary of State,

I have often argued, in my teachings as a professor of French and Francophone studies (Africa and Caribbean) at Montclair State University where I have taught now for 14 years, that none of the democratic nations of the world, including the United States, should patronize Africa by making certain practices acceptable simply because “it is Africa.” In other words, if human right abuses and the fact that a president should stay in power for 42 years are behaviors that are unacceptable to the people of the United States, then such practices should be considered unacceptable in Africa as well. Democracy should not be a matter of negotiation or choice. It should be the rule, even in Africa. As President Obama said during his July 2009 visit to Ghana, “Africa doesn’t need strongmen, it needs strong institutions.”

It is time, Mrs. Secretary of State, America upheld this principle by simply refusing Ali Bongo the honor of an official meeting either with President Barack Obama or the United States Secretary of State, or any other U.S. official for that matter. Tell Ali Bongo, Mrs. Secretary of State, that you will meet with him only after he has returned Gabon back to, at least, the 1991 constitution, and free and fair elections are held that will bring to power a president chosen by the people.

Sincerely,

Le Président

 Dr. Daniel MENGARA

Dr. Daniel Mengara
 President of “Bongo Doit Partir” (Bongo Must Go)
 Associate Professor of French and Francophone Studies at Montclair State University, New Jersey, USA