

Conflict Weekly

A brief review of conflict and peace processes across the world

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Gabon's President Ali Bongo. (Image Source: Simon Maina, AFP)

Coup in Gabon One Year of “Total Peace” in Colombia

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Gender | Environment | Ethnic Violence

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Gabon: Coup amid a political crisis and contentious election

Nithyashree RB

In the news

On 30 August, Gabon's senior military officials through national media, Gabon24, announced a coup citing improper elections. They stated: "Today the country is undergoing a severe institutional, political, economic, and social crisis; In the name of the Gabonese people, we have decided to defend the peace by putting an end to the current regime." The coup announcement came hours after incumbent President Ali Bongo was declared the winner of presidential elections held on 26 August. The officers informed that all the state institutions such as "the government, the Senate, the National Assembly, the Constitutional Court, the Economic, Social and Environmental Council and the Gabonese Elections Centre" are dissolved.

On 30 August, in response to the coup, the French government's spokesperson Olivier Veran stated: "France condemns the military coup that is underway in Gabon and is closely monitoring developments in the country, and France reaffirms its wish that the outcome of the election, once known, be respected."

On 30 August, the US national security spokesperson Joh Kirby stated: "It's deeply concerning to us. We will remain a supporter of the people in the region, a supporter of the people of Gabon and their demand for democratic government. We're watching this closely."

On 31 August, the head of the presidential guard, General Brice Oligui Nguema, was announced as Gabon's transitional leader. The same day, the African Union suspended Gabon's membership.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned "the ongoing coup attempt as a means to resolve the post-electoral crisis."

Issues at large

First, Gabon's long-standing political crisis. Since Gabon's independence in 1960, the country has been going through dynastic politics under the Bongo family, rigged elections, French influence, corruption and improper governance. The elites have disproportionately reaped the benefits of the country's oil and manganese resources resulting in social and economic inequality. In 1967, Omar Bongo established a single-party regime under the Gabonese Democratic Party (GDP) and was re-elected through elections. In 2009, President Ali Bongo's victory in the presidential elections with 41.73 per cent votes was deemed to be fraudulent and led to clashes between the police and the opposition. During the 2016 presidential elections, Bongo won with 48.23 per cent votes. The results of the election were delayed several times. Bongo was accused of exploiting the results in one of the provinces where according to The Guardian the voter turnout was 99.9 per cent although the total turnout of the country was just 59 per cent. The election led to clashes between the opposition supporters and the police. Three were shot dead in the 2019 elections, which led to a failed coup attempt. In the 2023 elections, ostensibly Bongo won with 64.27 per cent.

Second, the Bongo family's 55-year grip over Gabon. Since 1967, Gabon has been under the Bongo family. Omar Bongo, the founder of the ruling GDP, was the President of Gabon until his death. His son, Ali Bongo Ondimba, took over and has been the President for two

consecutive terms. During his tenure of 14 years, despite his successful policies towards rainforest conservation, the economic growth and diversification have been moderate. The World Bank estimates 70.5 per cent of the exports were oil. According to Al Jazeera, one-third of the population lives under the poverty line.

Third, divided response to the coup. People in the cities of Libreville and Port Gentil were seen celebrating the coup and took to the streets to express their support. Meanwhile, the opposition alliance Albert Ondo Ossa, Alternance 2023, condemned the coup. Speaking to Al Jazeera, Ossa stated: “You think you’re saving your country, but then you realize you’re back to square one. It’s embarrassing.” He affirmed that the Bongo family is in power through proxy. Ossa distinguished that the coup was a “palace coup” meaning that it was just a replacement of one Bongo by another.

Fourth, the indifferent regional and international actors. Neither France nor any other Western countries have denounced the dynastic rule under the Bongo family. Gabon is a country of lesser interest to the West as there is no jihadist insurgency, unlike the Sahel region. France refuses to dethrone Bongo, who has allowed it to enjoy constant influence over the country. For regional actors, potential instability in the region is a major concern. Nigerian President and chair of ECOWAS, Bola Tinubu, expressed similar concerns stating “the seeming autocratic contagion spreading across different regions of our beloved continent.”

Fifth, the eighth coup in the region since 2020. In July 2023, Niger underwent a coup. Burkina Faso, in 2022, witnessed two coups within eight months. Sudan and Guinea had one coup each in 2021. In 2020 and 2021, Mali had two coups within nine months. Gabon has become the first Central African country to undergo a military coup.

In perspective

First, Gabon has progressed into becoming socially and economically unequal, afflicted with poverty and controlled by the elites under the Bongo rule. In this situation, the question is whether the coup can have positive consequences, by discarding government institutions and lack of cohesion from the opposition. Closed borders and possible sanctions are concerning to an economy that is predominantly dependent on oil trade.

Second, the regional story of coups. Within three years, eight countries in Western and Central Africa have undergone military coups. The rising number of coups in the coup belt of Africa stresses the distrust towards democratic institutions. The domino effect might make the region unstable and susceptible to several challenges. Regardless, with rising anti-West sentiments and resentment towards external influence, the trend to own up and voice out is becoming prevalent.

Colombia: One year of “total peace” plan

Dhriti Mukherjee

In the news

On 30 August, Colombia marked the first anniversary of President Gustavo Petro's "total peace" policy. The agenda of the policy was to minimise violence by disassembling the country's armed groups. One year after the plan, with a reduction in violent clashes and structural economic problems being addressed (through fiscal reforms to control income



inequality), Petro seemingly made more progress than his predecessors.

A report published by Fundación Ideas Para la Paz on 22 August highlights key developments in this transformative period. Notably, violence against the state has decreased by 48 per cent, with fewer confrontations between security forces and armed groups. The report states that the threat posed by groups has reduced “because they have no pretensions or capacity to affect its stability or the seizure of power at the national level.” However, inter-group disputes among Colombia's main armed factions have surged by 85 per cent, posing challenges to the peace process. Homicides have seen a 1.5 per cent decrease; however, certain regions including the island of San Andrés and the departments of Sucre and Vaupes, where the armed groups are active, have witnessed a substantial rise in violence.

Issues at large

First, gangs and armed violence in Colombia. Colombian armed groups are of varied nature, ranging from guerilla groups to organised crime syndicates. Local communities have been the victims of violence and activities such as the recruitment of minors and drug trafficking. Of these, the leftist insurgency group, the National Liberation Army's (ELN's) main objective is to address the prevailing socio-economic gap in the country and “destabilising action in which big capital and a large part of the Colombian oligarchy are engaged.” The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP) is another major dissident group that is associated with drug trafficking. New members have refused to adhere to the terms of the 2016 peace agreement between the government and the former FARC.

Second, the idea of a peace plan and what unfurled. Upon securing office in August 2022, Petro initiated his “total peace” plan calling for a “multilateral ceasefire” for all armed groups. This move was a departure from the previous administration's heavy reliance on military solutions. Petro aimed to dismantle all armed groups simultaneously instead of looking at them from an individual perspective. The policy has two main strategic approaches- negotiations and ceasefires. However, his multi-pronged approach of using negotiations and ceasefires backfired within a month. He used negotiations and ceasefires to eliminate these groups. However, the armed groups began extending their territories, leading to an increase in civilian and police casualties.

Third, the movers and shakers. The plan has garnered significant domestic and international support. Countries including Norway, Cuba, and Venezuela are actively involved in facilitating talks. However, there has also been a visible presence of “shakers”-people who oppose the plan. This essentially includes Petro's political opponents including Álvaro Uribe Vélez and Iván Duque Márquez from the Centro Democrático party, who are of the view that negotiations with armed groups may in turn legitimise them.

Fourth, challenges faced in the last year. Currently, Petro faces multiple challenges to overcome with the recruitment of minors being the most important one which has been described by Petro as “an inadmissible crime against humanity.” There were 115 cases of child recruitment in 2022 as reported by the United Nations. The use of coercion has further intensified the risk of violent repercussions against families of children who do not comply. Besides, upon acquiring new territory, the groups block main roads and passages to assert their control and authority.

In perspective

First, the hits and misses. It is premature to pass a definitive judgement on the peace plan's success or failure. Notably, fewer civilian casualties reflect a reduction in violence, offering a glimmer of hope for a more peaceful future. However, there have been several misses. With three of five ceasefires failing in April 2023, having just lasted five months, Petro's administration is unable to maintain the support of the bigger groups due to the lack of commitment and compliance. Criminal organizations, particularly the Gulf Clan, continue illicit activities and violence, casting doubt on their commitment to the peace process. Although the intentions are positive, the method of achieving them is inefficient.

Second, complex regional developments. The armed violence in Colombia has consequent implications for its neighbouring countries. Of these, Venezuela is the most affected, where frequent conflicts along the borders between the ELN and FARC have led thousands of people to flee. Colombian cartels also have links with international mafias established in countries including the US, France, Germany, and the UK. This indicates that moving forward, Petro and his administration will have to expand the horizon of their plan, to include measures that can be taken to curb violence internationally.

Issues in Peace and Conflict This Week: Regional Roundups

Rishika Yadav, Anu Maria Joseph, Femy Francis, Padmashree Anandan, Dhriti Mukherjee and Akriti Sharma

East and Southeast Asia

China: Includes disputed regions to their "standard map"

On 28 August, China released a new map incorporating the contentious regions of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, the Aksai Chin region of the Indian union territory of Ladakh, Taiwan and the South China Sea. The map was referred to as the "standard map" by the Chinese Ministry of Natural Resources. Claims over the state of Arunachal Pradesh and the Aksai Chin region have been a long-standing dispute between India and China. Indian Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson, Arindam Bagchi, stated: "We have today lodged a strong protest through diplomatic channels with the Chinese side on the so-called 2023 standard map of China that lays claim to India's territory." Indian Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, added: "It's an old habit of theirs. These (territories) are very much part of India. This government is very clear what our territories are. Making absurd claims doesn't make others' territories yours." Besides, the Malaysian government has rejected the map which overlaps with Malaysia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) off the coasts of Sabah and Sarawak on Borneo Island in the South China Sea.

Japan: Hints on filing complaint to WTO against Chinese seafood import ban

On 29 August, Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yoshimasa Hayashi, warned of filing a complaint against China to the World Trade Organization (WTO) over the ban on import of Japanese seafood. Hayashi urged Beijing for an immediate reversal of the ban and added that Tokyo will take "necessary steps under frameworks such as the WTO." The development comes after China announced the suspension of all seafood imports from Japan on 25 August after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant began releasing the treated water into the Pacific Ocean on 24 August. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed the move was



to “protect the health of Chinese consumers.”

North Korea: Plans to modernise its naval forces

On 29 August, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un called for strengthening its naval forces for what it claims to block invasion by the US and South Korea near the waters of the Korean Peninsula. The development comes as a response to the Ulchi Freedom Shield summer exercises between the US and South Korean forces. Kim stated: "Owing to the reckless confrontational moves of the U.S. and other hostile forces, the waters off the Korean Peninsula have been reduced into the world's biggest war hardware concentration spot, the most unstable waters with the danger of a nuclear war." North Korea sees the drill as a foreplay for invasion, although the allies have emphasised that the drills are defensive. For the first time in four decades, the US deployed a nuclear-armed submarine in the South Korean port city of Busan. The drills are a response to North Korea's modernisation of its naval forces' weapons and equipment, criticising the rising presence of US strategic assets in the region.

Timor-Leste: Myanmar expels diplomat

On 27 August, Myanmar's military regime expelled East Timor's charge d'affaires of the country's embassy in Yangon for hosting a meeting with the banned National Unity Government (NUG) which is considered a terrorist organisation. Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated: "Such irresponsible actions of the government of Timor-Leste are not only harming the bilateral diplomatic relations between the two countries but also encouraging the terrorist group to further commit their violations in Myanmar." East Timor condemned the move stressing "the importance of supporting all efforts for the return of democratic order in Myanmar." East Timor is set to become the 11th member of the Associate of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); however, its Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão indicated reconsideration if the conflict in Myanmar persists. ASEAN's efforts to engage with Myanmar's military are regressive and divisions within the group over handling the situation continue.

Indonesia: 7.0 magnitude earthquake strikes north of Bali and Lombok islands

On 29 August, the European-Mediterranean Seismological Centre (EMSC) reported an earthquake with a magnitude of seven on the Richter scale struck deep beneath the sea, north of Bali and Lombok islands in Indonesia. The earthquake's epicentre was 203 kilometres north of the city of Mataram and at a depth of 516 kilometres, causing residents to flee buildings. Subsequent tremors of 6.1 and 6.5 magnitudes in the Richter scale followed. Despite initial panic and evacuations, reassurances through text messages calmed fears. Indonesia, located in the Pacific Ring of Fire, is prone to earthquakes and has established protocols for prompt response and communication to prevent panic.

South Asia

India: Violence in Manipur continues; six killed in latest fighting

On 31 August, The Hindu reported that at least six people were killed in heavy fighting between the Meteis and the Kukis in the areas bordering the Churachandpur and Bishnupur districts in the state of Manipur. The Reuters quoted unnamed defence sources claiming that women-led groups in the Meitei-dominated Bishnupur have been obstructing additional security forces from reaching the region. Meanwhile, the police stated: "Security forces deployed in the area responded and subsequently firing has subsided. The situation is tense but under control." The attack comes after the Union Home Ministry's security adviser for

the Northeast, A K Mishra, held talks with the Kuki-Zo insurgent group, agreeing to the Suspension of Operation (SoO) with the government. The SoO-signed groups have been demanding a Union Territory for the Kuki-Zo-Hmar-dominated districts in Manipur.

Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa

Syria: Israeli airstrike renders Aleppo airport inoperable

On 28 August, the Syrian Ministry of Defence stated that the Aleppo International Airport was rendered inoperative after an attack by Israeli air power. Reuters quoted an unnamed military source: "The Israeli enemy carried out an air attack ... targeting Aleppo International Airport. The aggression caused material damage to the airport's runway and put it out of service." Israel has not responded to the attack. Israel has been carrying out attacks on Syrian airports and air bases in recent months over suspected Iran-linked weapon transfers and personnel deployment in the country.

Libya: LNA's air strikes on FACT base

On 25 August, Al Jazeera reported on the Libyan National Army (LNA) launching air strikes on "foreign armed groups" near the Chad border. LNA, led by Khalifa Haftar, carried out the attacks against Libya-based Front for Change and Concord (FACT), a rebel group, in the outpost of Umm al-Araneb in Murzuq district. The FACT fighters had taken over more than 2,000 houses under construction in the region. LNA spokesperson Ahmad Mismari stated that LNA would "no longer allow armed groups or factions to use Libyan territory to launch attacks against neighbouring countries." Libya has been going through civil unrest since 2011 after the death of Muhammad Gaddafi. Rival leaders, Abdulhamid Dbeibah who leads the UN-backed Tripoli-based administration and former interior minister Fathi Bashagha supported by military leader Khalifa Haftar, have been forging alliances with multiple rebel factions in the neighbouring countries including Chad and Sudan.

Democratic Republic of Congo: CODECO attack kills 14 civilians

On 29 August, Al Jazeera reported that the Cooperative Development of Congo (CODECO), an armed rebel group active in the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri, killed 14 civilians and one Congolese soldier. The attack happened in the village of Gobu on 27 August. Four attackers were killed in the fighting. CODECO, a militia led by the ethnic Lendu community, has been fighting with the Zaire, a militia group of ethnic Hema community, since 2017. According to the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism, nearly 1,800 people were killed in various CODECO attacks until 2022. More than 120 rebel militias are fighting in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo for land and resources.

Niger: French ambassador to stay, despite ultimatum

On 28 August, French President Emmanuel Macron said that its ambassador to Niger will continue to stay in the country. The development comes after Niger's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an ultimatum for France's ambassador to Niger, Sylvain Itte, to leave the country, claiming that Itte refused to meet the new regime citing France's actions that were "contrary to the interests of Niger." Macron stated: "I think our policy is the right one. It's based on the courage of President Bazoum, and on the commitments of our ambassador on the ground who is remaining despite all the pressure, despite all the declarations made by the illegitimate authorities." Macron added that France would support any military action by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) against the coup leaders.



Europe and the Americas

France: Drug violence in Nimes

On 24 August, an 18-year-old man was shot dead in the French city of Nimes, days after a ten-year-old was shot dead in a drug-related attack. Both shootings occurred in the city's Pissevin neighbourhood, which has been beset by drug violence. French Minister of Interior, Gerald Darmanin, spoke of a "tit-for-tat attack between drug dealers." Yoda and DZ Mafia, two competing gangs, are suspected behind the majority of the shootings in northern regions of the Mediterranean port city. Small regional cities, such as Nimes, are becoming a hotspot for drug-related violence.

Ukraine: US joins the F-16 pilot training

On 24 August, the Pentagon announced plans to commence training for Ukrainian pilots for the F-16 fighter jets in the US from September. Originally, a European coalition effort led by the Netherlands and Denmark was set for pilot instruction. However, due to capacity constraints, Ukraine will now send several pilots and support personnel for training in the US. The training will begin with English-language courses in the state of Texas, followed by flight training in the state of Arizona. Although the F-16 jets won't immediately impact Ukraine's counteroffensive, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy anticipates receiving around 61 F-16 fighter jets from multiple NATO countries to bolster the country's air capabilities.

Europe: EU's Digital Services Act comes into practice targeting tech giants

On 25 August, BBC reported on the forthcoming compulsory compliance of major tech platforms including Facebook, TikTok, and Google, to the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) 2022, which aims to protect users. Platforms with over 45 million EU users, including Alibaba, Amazon, and Twitter, would face stringent rules to prevent illegal content, protect rights, and ensure public security. Breaches could result in fines of up to six per cent of turnover and service suspension. DSA requires transparency in algorithms and sharing data with researchers. Some platforms have already implemented changes in line with DSA. The DSA reflects growing concerns over tech giants' influence and to safeguard users' interests, setting a precedent for digital regulation worldwide.

The US: South Carolina Supreme Court upholds abortion law

On 29 August, the Supreme Court in the state of South Carolina rejected a request by the pro-abortion group, Planned Parenthood, to reconsider ruling on upholding the state's ban on abortion after a foetal heartbeat is detected, which the group say will prevent women from terminating pregnancies after about six weeks. The court in its ruling on 23 August had upheld the state's law on abortion which left unanswered what constitutes a "fetal heartbeat." The group expressed their disappointment with the ruling stating that they will "continue to fight to restore abortion access for all South Carolinians." Meanwhile, South Carolina Attorney General Alan Wilson applauded the decision stating: "The right to life is foremost and absolutely must be protected and prioritized."

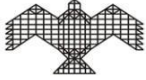
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About NIAS-International Peace Research Initiative(IPRI)

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The International Peace Research Initiative (IPRI), initiated in 2018 at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), is a part of the Conflict Resolution and Peace Research Programme at the School of Conflict and Security Studies.

IPRI undertakes research on various issues relating to peace with special emphasis on radicalisation, sustainable peace, gender roles in peacebuilding and global protest movements. IPRI researches are published as briefs, reports and commentary.

About Konrad Adenauer Stiftung



The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is a political foundation. Established in 1955 as “Society for Christian-Democratic Civic Education,” in 1964, the Foundation proudly took on the name of Konrad Adenauer, the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. KAS cooperates with governmental institutions, political parties and civil society organizations, building strong partnerships along the way. In particular, KAS seeks to intensify political cooperation in the area of development cooperation on the foundations of its objectives and values. Together with the partners, KAS makes a significant contribution to the creation of a global order that empowers every country to determine its own developmental priorities and destiny in an internationally responsible manner.

KAS has organized its program priorities in India into five working areas: Foreign and Security Policy; Economic, Climate, and Energy Policy; Rule of Law; Political Dialogue focused on Social and Political Change; and Media and Youth. The India Office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation takes great pride in its cooperation with Indian partner institutions that implement jointly curated projects and programmes.

About Conflict Weekly



The Conflict Weekly an academic endeavour to bring every Wednesday/Thursday a weekly analysis of the conflict and peace processes in the world; aiming to look at the larger peace picture. It is published by the NIAS-IPRI in collaboration with the KAS India Office.

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