Congo

For President Denis Sassou Nguesso, who has ruled the Republic of Congo for all but five years since 1979, 2019 marked the midpoint of his third presidential term since reclaiming power in 1997. Sassou Nguesso viewed the year as a turning point. His judicial system sentenced a second rival from the 2016 presidential election to 20 years in prison, leaving no major opposition figures to challenge him in the 2021 election. To mitigate the financial crisis that has gripped Congo since 2017, Sassou Nguesso secured debt relief from the IMF and the Chinese government, his second financial bailout since 2011. After the military campaign in the Pool region between April and December 2016, Sassou Nguesso signed several military cooperation agreements with Moscow to refurbish existing war materiel and purchase new weapons in the year ahead. Nonetheless, Sassou Nguesso’s position remained tenuous. Existing oil fields were reaching maturity. The non-oil sector remained stagnant. Citizens remained frustrated by the government’s economic mismanagement and sustained human rights abuses.

Domestic Politics

The year began, as did 2018, with judicial proceedings against Sassou Nguesso’s political opponents. André Okombi Salissa was a Sassou Nguesso ally during the 1997 civil war, a government minister between 1997 and 2012, and a deputy in the National Assembly between 2002 and 2017. Okombi Salissa publicly opposed the constitutional referendum of October 2015 and contested the March 2016 presidential election. When fellow opposition leader and presidential candidate General Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko was arrested in June 2016, Okombi Salissa went into hiding, only to be discovered by Sassou Nguesso’s security services in January 2017 and quickly incarcerated. Okombi

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Salissa’s trial before the Brazzaville Criminal Court began on January 31, 2019, for “threatening State security,” along with three other “accomplices.” They were found guilty on March 7 and, like General Mokoko before them, sentenced to 20 years of forced labor. Okombi Salissa’s lawyers walked out of the courtroom in protest. Before the trial began, the Fédération de l’opposition congolaise, of which Okombi Salissa was a member, denounced the trial and demanded the release of all political prisoners. Charles Zacharie Bowao, the Fédération’s spokesperson, said: “We cannot hold any activities in the public square because the regime does not permit it. Each time we have organized something, we are always met by security services.”

The regime also targeted civil society activists and other opponents. In January, the regime’s security services delivered the body of Commandant Servais Magloire Babissat to the Pointe-Norie morgue. Detained without trial since February 2016, Commandant Babissat was apparently killed via torture. The regime accused him of planning a coup ahead of the March 2016 presidential election. Augustine Kala Kala, a professor at Marien Ngouabi University in Brazzaville, was a longtime advisor to Okombi Salissa and supported his candidacy for the 2016 presidential election. For this, Kala Kala was kidnapped by regime security forces in September 2016, brutally tortured, and then left by the Brazzaville morgue in October 2016. Kala Kala died of complications from torture in May. Between October and December, the Sassou Nguesso government arrested five civil society activists for “inciting public disorder and threatening state security.” They remained in prison at the end of the year.

Sassou Nguesso’s efforts to quash opposition extended to France. General Ferdinand Mbaou, a senior military aide to former president Pascal Lissouba, went into exile in 1997 and called for a civil disobedience campaign against the 2015 constitutional referendum. In early 2018, the Sassou Nguesso government commissioned three former French spies to assassinate Mbaou in Paris. Among them was Daniel Forestier, who was charged by the French government in September 2018 for conspiracy and possessing explosive devices. In March, Forestier was found dead in a parking lot outside Geneva, shot five times, including once to the head. Le Monde, a leading French daily, described Forestier’s murder as a “a revenge killing carried out by professionals.” Though Forestier’s murderer was never identified, both the French police and Forestier’s lawyer suspected that the assassination was related to Sassou Nguesso’s plot against Mbaou. “With [Forestier’s] death,” Mbaou’s lawyers said, “an essential part of the evidence … has disappeared.”

These human rights abuses elicited widespread outrage. In May, the Observatoire congolais des droits de l’homme (OCDH), the country’s only active human rights advocacy group, released its annual report. Entitled “Terror and Permanent Repression” and totaling 105 pages, it documented a range of government atrocities, and concluded that there had been “a spectacular degradation in the human rights situation.” The 2019 report was conspicuous for its criticism of the judicial system. “The government,” OCDH observed, “constantly dictates to prosecutors and judges the decisions they are required to make.” In June, journalist Ghys Fortuné Dombé-Bemba, among Congo’s
leading journalists, released *From Hell to Freedom*, which chronicles his 18 months in detention between January 2017 and July 2018. The account is harrowing, and reiterates longstanding accusations of torture and solitary confinement. In October, the United Nations (UN) released a report about the condition of Congo’s autochthonous population. In 2011, as the Sassou Nguesso government finalized its debt relief agreement with the IMF and World Bank, it passed a law that ostensibly criminalized discrimination. Instead, the UN found “profound, systemic, and extremely rooted discrimination.”

Sassou Nguesso has long been regarded as among Africa’s most corrupt autocrats. Still, the sheer volume of new allegations of corruption was noteworthy. The year’s first major revelation emerged in February. Global Witness, a British NGO, reported that SOCO International, an oil company listed on the London Stock Exchange, had sold its operating stake in the lucrative Marine XI oil field to a shell company, Coastal Energy Holdings, which had no prior experience, cash, or assets. The sale occurred well below market value, and the shell company promptly installed as managing director Landry Gantsui, spouse of Sassou Nguesso’s daughter Inès. In March, the Environmental Investigation Agency reported that the Dejia Group, controlled by Chinese businessman Xu Gong De, routinely transferred “suitcases of cash” to longtime Forestry Minister Henri Djombo in exchange for major timber concessions and lower taxes. In April, Global Witness reported that in 2014 Claudia, another daughter of Sassou Nguesso, had used $7.1 million from the state treasury to purchase a 1,700 square foot apartment in Trump International Hotel & Tower, overlooking New York City’s Central Park, for her daughter Lauren. In May, Finance Uncovered disclosed new details about the origins of the Brazzaville Foundation, a “charity” that Sassou Nguesso uses to advertise his credentials as a champion of the environment. The Brazzaville Foundation was established by former weapons dealer Jean-Yves Ollivier, after he received a $60 million windfall from an oil deal he brokered with Sassou Nguesso, and Lord Tim Bell, whose Bell Pottinger public relations firm helped craft Sassou Nguesso’s campaign to secure a constitutional referendum in 2015. To give the Brazzaville Foundation some legitimacy, in September 2014 Ollivier persuaded Prince Michael of the British royal family to serve as the charity’s patron. In August, Global Witness reported that in 2014 alone companies owned by Sassou Nguesso’s son Denis Christel received $50 million from the Congolese state treasury. In September, a group of Swiss and Germany journalists reported that Sassou Nguesso had chartered the world’s only Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner rental airplane for his visit to Paris. The rental airplane reportedly cost $70,000 per hour. In October, Global Witness reported that Africa Oil and Gas Corporation (AOGC), owned by longtime Sassou Nguesso aide Denis Gokana, had received sizeable stakes in several oil blocks operated by Italian oil giant Eni.

These revelations continued to outrage Congolese citizens. Since the Congolese constitution grants members of parliament immunity from prosecution, in August civil society activists called on the government to lift the parliamentary immunity for Denis Christel and Claudia. The government
refused. In October, a group of civil society activists, led by OCDH and Joe Washington Ebina, filed a complaint in Brazzaville courts that accused Denis Christel and Claudia of embezzlement, money laundering, and corruption. Again, the government did nothing.

Congo’s opposition has historically been divided into two camps: a “republican” opposition that competes in elections but generally refrains from accusing Sassou Nguesso of corruption or human rights abuses, and a “radical” opposition that accuses him of both and is subject to widespread repression. Citizens widely believe that the “republican” opposition accepts kickbacks from the regime in exchange for its relative acquiescence. These beliefs were confirmed in October, when a phone call between the minister of women, Inès Nefer Ingani, and another member of Sassou Nguesso’s Parti congolais du travail (PCT) leaked on social media. In the recording, Ngani confirms that Pascal Tsaty Mabiala, president of the Union panafricaine pour la démocratie sociale (UPADS), had received a “large sum of money … from the President’s office.” The response was swift. Tsaty Mabiala threatened to sue Ngani for defamation and Sassou Nguesso removed her from the government. Given ongoing government repression – of which the incarceration of General Mokoko and Okombi Salissa were the two most obvious manifestations – the “radical” opposition remained rather quiet. The exception was in June, when an advisor to General Mokoko, Anatole Limbongo Ngoka, formed a new political party, Le Paradis, in advance of the 2021 election. Released in October 2018 after 30 months in prison, Ngoka described his objectives for the new party: “If General Mokoko remains in prison until [the 2021 election], then we will field a candidate to free the General and all of Congo.”

The year concluded with the PCT’s fifth ordinary party congress, held between December 27 and December 30. Although the next presidential election will not occur until March 2021, the PCT nonetheless announced that all “2,588 attendees decided unanimously that comrade Denis Sassou Nguesso be … our candidate in the presidential election of 2021.” Pierre Moussa, Sassou Nguesso’s long-time finance minister, was elected the party’s secretary general, replacing Pierre Ngolo, who since 2017 has been president of the Senate.

Foreign Affairs

Despite having received debt relief in early 2011 from the IMF and World Bank as part of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, by mid 2017 Congo was again in financial crisis. This financial crisis was driven by persistently low global oil prices and Sassou Nguesso’s massive infrastructure program, which was plagued by inefficiency and corruption. Indeed, despite the modest rise in global oil prices in mid-2019, they still remained at roughly half their mid-2014 value. This financial crisis conditioned Sassou Nguesso’s foreign policy.

By 2019, the composition of Congo’s external debt was different than in 2011, with China holding nearly 40%. Accordingly, Sassou Nguesso’s strategy to secure debt relief focused on both the IMF and the Chinese government. These two campaigns were very different. Sassou Nguesso
sought to persuade the IMF of his commitment to “good governance” and transparency. This was a difficult sell, due both to his longstanding reputation and the steady stream of corruption revelations throughout 2019. Still, the Sassou Nguesso government moved to purge the public sector payroll of fictitious employees. By late January, the government had purged some 4,525 fictitious employees from the payroll. It also identified 11,000 public sector employees who were receiving employment benefits for which they did not qualify. The government also continued with plans to replace its discredited Anti-Corruption Commission with a new Haute autorité de lutte contre la corruption, though Congolese citizens remained deeply skeptical about whether the new body would prove more willing to prosecute high-level corruption than its predecessor.

The IMF ultimately decided to condition a three-year extended credit facility on the Sassou Nguesso government’s ability to demonstrate the long-term sustainability of its debt. In practice, this required Sassou Nguesso to secure a debt relief agreement with the Chinese government. This agreement was finalized in April. Of Congo’s $2.56 billion debt to China, Beijing extended repayment of roughly $1.7 billion over an additional 15 years, with a third of that required to be paid off by the end of 2021. Beijing also refused to reduce the amount of principal owed. The deal was viewed as a test case for the IMF, as a number of African governments confront increasingly unsustainable debts from a boom in commercial borrowing, Eurobonds, and Chinese lending. The IMF also instructed the Sassou Nguesso government to “[continue] good-faith efforts to restructure commercial debt,” implicitly referring to its oil-backed loan agreements with Glencore, Trafigura, and others. In July, the IMF announced that it had agreed to a bailout worth roughly $449 million over three years. The IMF’s decision unlocked an additional $2 billion in financial support from the African Development Bank, and drew widespread criticism from opposition leaders and civil society activists.

In return for Chinese support, Sassou Nguesso emerged as an outspoken supporter of the Beijing government on the international stage. In July, the governments of 22 industrialized democracies – though, notably, not the administration of American President Donald Trump – signed an open letter condemning the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) ongoing wave of repression against ethnic Uyghurs in Xinjiang. In response, a group of 54 governments circulated their own letter “[commending] China’s remarkable achievements in the field of human rights.” Sassou Nguesso was among the signatories. In September, Sassou Nguesso hosted the fifth edition of the Invest in Africa Forum, organized by the Chinese government, the China Development Bank, and the World Bank. The Forum was attended by four other heads of state: Paul Kagame of Rwanda, João Manuel Lourenço of Angola, Félix Antoine Tshisekedi of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Faustin-Archange Touadéra of the Central African Republic. In his year-end “state of the nation” address, Sassou Nguesso spoke directly to Chinese President Xi Jinping, “testifying to our profound gratitude.” Jeune Afrique, a Paris-based current affairs magazine, described Sassou Nguesso’s comments as “quasi lyrical.”
With human rights abuses mounting, Sassou Nguesso also continued to build a closer relationship with the Russian government. As part of Moscow’s effort to reestablish a sphere of influence in Sub-Saharan Africa, in May President Vladimir Putin and Sassou Nguesso signed a series of military cooperation agreements. These agreements had three broad components. First, the Putin government agreed to send a group of Russian military technicians to train their Congolese counterparts in the “operation, maintenance and repair” of Russian military materiel still in use by the Congolese military: armored vehicles, artillery, and helicopters, in particular. Second, although no new purchase agreements were announced, the Putin and Sassou Nguesso governments discussed the possibility of new Russian manufactured weapons in the short-term. Third, the governments also announced a cooperation agreements to advance Congo’s civil nuclear capabilities. Many Congolese citizens viewed the cooperation agreements as an effort to strengthen the military’s capabilities in advance of the 2021 election, especially given the lengthy campaign in the Pool region between April and December 2016.

Sassou Nguesso’s bilateral relationship with the French government improved during 2019. To Sassou Nguesso’s frustration, in February a French judge denied the government’s request to be named as a co-defendant in the *biens mal acquis* investigation into Sassou Nguesso’s personal wealth in France. However, French president Emmanuel Macron emerged as a quiet supporter of Sassou Nguesso’s bid for debt relief from the IMF. Macron’s government also did little to push Sassou Nguesso to limit human rights abuses. In September, during Sassou Nguesso’s visit to Paris, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian announced that the French government “[awaited] some actions” relating to General Mokoko’s imprisonment, though he refrained from specifying precisely what these “actions” were. Mokoko remained in prison at the end of the year.

With the American government firmly opposed to IMF bailouts for countries indebted to Beijing, Sassou Nguesso’s bilateral relationship with Washington remained tenuous. The only major development occurred in September, when the US embassy in Brazzaville arranged for several FBI officers to conduct a series of training sessions on interrogation techniques with the Congolese police. The objective was apparently to reduce the rate of police torture. Many Congolese citizens were puzzled, since the government’s use of torture appears to be politically motivated, rather than a function of training.

**Socioeconomic Developments**

Between 2016 and 2018, Congo’s real GDP contracted by an average of 1% per year. In 2019, buoyed by the financial bailout, higher oil prices, and increased oil production, Congo’s real GDP was projected to increase by 2.2%. Although total debt stock as a share of GDP fell from 117% in 2017 to 77.5% in 2019, debt service still accounted for 37% of government revenue, which the IMF deemed unsustainable. In his year-end “state of the nation” address, Sassou Nguesso declared his “optimism” about the prospect of an economic recovery in 2020, due in part to a projected
increase in oil production to 140 million barrels. Thereafter, however, oil production was projected to decline, as existing oil fields reach maturity.

To mitigate this decline, the Sassou Nguesso government has sought to accelerate the search for new oil reserves in the Cuvette Basin. In August, two Congolese firms widely acknowledged to be fronts for the Sassou Nguesso family – the Société africaine de recherche pétrolière et distribution (SARPD-Oil) et Petroleum Exploration and Africa (PEPA) – announced that they had discovered deposits capable of producing 980,000 barrels of crude oil per day. If true, this would represent a massive windfall, as Congo’s current daily production rate hovers around 350,000 barrels. The announcement was met with widespread skepticism. One French analyst described the claim as “completely phony, ridiculous.” Civil society activists wondered whether the announcement was aimed to distract from the Global Witness report days earlier that had accused Denis Christel of embezzling some $50 million from the Congolese treasury in 2014 alone. By year’s end, no additional information about the discovery had been provided by SARPD-Oil, PEPA, or the Sassou Nguesso government.

The non-oil sector continued to stagnate. After contractions of 5% in 2017 and 2018, the growth rate of this sector recovered slightly in 2019, and by year’s end was projected to be less than 1%, substantially less than the 2% annual inflation rate. Still, the year featured two major developments. In May, the African Development Bank announced that it would finance a bridge between Kinshasa and Brazzaville, the world’s two closest capitals by geographic proximity but separated by the Congo River. Of a projected total cost of $550 million, the African Development Bank planned to contribute $210 million. Construction was expected to begin in August 2020. In November, Sassou Nguesso inaugurated Congo’s first polymetal production factory, in Bouenza, representing an investment of $300 million and operated by the Société de recherche et d’exploitation minière (SOREMI). Chinese interests accounted for 90% of shares; it remained unclear who holds the 10% balance. The factory produces 20,000 tons of copper per year, mainly for export. Its production will expand to zinc in 2021 and, by 2022, to lead.

Notwithstanding the IMF agreement in July, by late November the world was again reminded of Congo’s persistent inequality and the government’s persistent failure to mitigate it. A union of some 26,000 retirees published an open letter to the Sassou Nguesso government that demanded 21 months of unpaid pension arrears. Days later, some 100,000 citizens, mostly along the banks of the Congo River, were displaced by flooding. Citing budgetary constraints, the government appealed to the UN for financial support. These communities remained in crisis by year’s end.