

= 1964 Gabon coup d'état =

The 1964 Gabon coup d'état was staged between 17 and 18 February 1964 by Gabonese military officers who rose against Gabonese President Léon M'ba . Before the coup , Gabon was seen as one of the most politically stable countries in Africa . The coup resulted from M'ba 's dissolution of the Gabonese legislature on 21 January 1964 , and during a takeover with few casualties 150 coup plotters arrested M'ba and a number of his government officials . Through Radio Libreville , they asked the people of Gabon to remain calm and assured them that the country 's pro @-@ France foreign policy would remain unchanged . A provisional government was formed , and the coup 's leaders installed Deputy Jean @-@ Hilaire Aubame , who was M'ba 's primary political opponent and had been uninvolved in the coup , as president . Meanwhile , M'ba was sent to Lambaréné , 250 kilometres ( 155 mi ) from Libreville . There was no major uprising or reaction by the Gabonese people when they received word of the coup , which the military interpreted as a sign of approval .

After being informed of the coup by Gabonese Chief of Staff Albert @-@ Bernard Bongo , French President Charles de Gaulle resolved to restore the M'ba government , honoring a 1960 treaty signed between the deposed government and France when Gabon became independent . With the help of French paratroopers , the provisional government was toppled during the night of 19 February and M'ba was reinstated as president . Afterward , M'ba imprisoned more than 150 of his opponents , pledging " no pardon or pity " but rather " total punishment " . Aubame was sentenced to 10 years of hard labor and 10 years of exile , a sentence that was later commuted . During this time , the ageing president became increasingly reclusive , opting to stay in his presidential palace under the protection of French troops . Within three years , M'ba was diagnosed with cancer ; he died on 28 November 1967 .

= = Background and origins = =

Gabon gained its independence from France on 17 August 1960 . The country had a relatively high standard of living and was considered one of the more stable countries in West Africa , both politically and economically . At the time of the coup , the country had an estimated US \$ 200 average annual income and was one of the few countries in Africa with a positive trade balance , with exports exceeding imports by 30 percent . As of 1964 , the country was among the largest producers of uranium and manganese in French Africa , which Time suggested was one of the reasons for France 's response to the coup . It also had petroleum , iron , and logging interests stationed in Gabon .

Léon M'ba was one of the most loyal allies to France in Africa , even after the country 's independence . In fact , France maintained 600 paratroopers and an air force unit , which included Mirage V and Jaguar jet fighters , at the Camp de Gaulle military base until at least 1987 , a warning to any Gabonese coup plotters . M'ba famously commented during a 1961 visit to France that " [ a ] Il Gabonese have two fatherlands : France and Gabon " , [ a ] and Europeans enjoyed particularly friendly treatment under his regime . French journalist Pierre Péan asserted that M'ba secretly tried to prevent Gabonese independence ; instead , he lobbied for it to become an overseas territory of France . He went so far as to say that " Gabon is an extreme case , verging on caricature , of neocolonialism . "

M'ba aspired to establish Gabon as a democracy , which he believed was necessary to attract foreign investors . At the same time , he attempted to reconcile the imperatives of democracy with the necessity for a strong and coherent government . In practice , however , M'ba showed a weakness in attaining his goal ? by this time he was known as " the old man " , or " the boss " ? to have a high degree of authority . On 21 February 1961 , a new constitution was unanimously adopted , providing for a " hyperpresidential " regime . M'ba now had full executive powers : he could appoint ministers whose functions and responsibilities were decided by him ; he could dissolve the National Assembly by choice or prolong its term beyond the normal five years ; he could declare a state of emergency when he believed the need arose , though for this amendment he would have to consult the people via a referendum . This was , in fact , very similar to the constitution adopted in

favor of Fulbert Youlou at roughly the same time . A report from the French secret service summarized the situation :

He regarded himself as a truly democratic leader ; nothing irritated him more than being called a dictator . Still , [ M 'ba ] wasn 't happy until he had the constitution rewritten to give him virtually all power and transforming the parliament into high @-@ priced scenery that could be bypassed as needed . [ b ]

M 'ba 's chief political opponent had been Jean @-@ Hilaire Aubame , a former protégé and his half @-@ brother 's foster son . M 'ba was backed by the French forestry interests , while Aubame was supported by the Roman Catholic missions and the French administration . Aubame , a deputy of the opposition party l ? Union démocratique et sociale gabonaise ( UDSG ) in the National Assembly , had few fundamental ideological differences with the M 'ba @-@ led Bloc Démocratique Gabonais ( BDG ) , including advocating less economic dependence on France and faster " Africanization " of French political jobs . However , the new constitution and the National Union ( a political union they founded ) suspended the quarrels between M 'ba and Aubame from 1961 to 1963 . Despite this , political unrest grew within the population , and many students held demonstrations on the frequent dissolutions of the National Assembly and the general political attitude in the country . The president did not hesitate to enforce the law himself ; with a chicotte , he whipped citizens who did not show respect for him , including passersby who " forgot " to salute him .

Aubame served as foreign minister under the coalition government , though in early 1963 he was dropped from the Cabinet for refusing to create a single @-@ party Gabon . To oust Aubame from his legislative seat , M 'ba appointed him President of the Supreme Court on 25 February , practically a powerless post . M 'ba supporters tried to pass a bill that declared that a member of parliament could only hold a single role in government . The president claimed that Aubame had resigned from the National Assembly , citing incompatibility with the functions of the assembly . Aubame , however , unexpectedly resigned from the Supreme Court on 10 January 1964 , complicating matters for M 'ba . In a fit of rage , M 'ba dissolved the National Assembly on 21 January 1964 . The New York Times speculates that this was due to it not supporting M 'ba in Aubame 's removal .

The electoral conditions were announced as such : The election 67 districts were reduced to 47 . M 'ba disqualified Aubame by announcing that anyone who had held a post recently was banned . Any party would have to submit 47 candidates who had to pay US \$ 160 or none at all . Thus , over US \$ 7 @,@ 500 would be deposited without considering campaign expenses . M 'ba 's idea was that no party other than his would have the money to enter candidates . In response to this , the opposition announced its refusal to participate in elections that they did not consider fair .

= = Planning = =

Little is known of the planning of the coup . No demonstrations followed Mba 's dissolution of the National Assembly , so the coup could be classified as simply a " palace coup " . The 1964 ? 1965 edition of the Adelphi Papers speculates that the continued presence of young French military officers in Gabon may have been an inspiration to the plotters of the coup . Much of the 600 @-@ man Gabonese army had previously served in the French army prior to independence , where they were paid modestly . Like much of the rest of the country , they were displeased by M 'ba 's actions against Aubame , a probable cause for involvement .

U.S. Ambassador to Gabon Charles Darlington suggested that the coup plotters may have tried to imitate the style of Colonel Christophe Soglo . Soglo , a commander in Dahomey 's 800 @-@ man army , had deposed President Hubert Maga in October 1963 , ruled for about a month , then resigned in favor of Dahomey 's citizens . The plotters apparently did not consider French involvement , so therefore didn 't take any additional steps to prevent it . They could have created protests to show public support , although the spokesman for the coup plotters , Sub @-@ Lieutenant Daniel Mbene , justified the coup by claiming in a broadcast that the army had to act to avoid the rash of " uncontrollable demonstrations that would have been difficult to halt " .

It is unlikely that Aubame participated in the planning of the coup . It appears that he joined the

effort after being recruited by the new government . His nephew , Pierre Eyeguet , a former ambassador to the United Kingdom , may have known of the plot beforehand and notified his uncle , although it is unknown whether or not Aubame established contact with the plotters .

Lieutenant Valerie Essone only decided to participate on 17 February . This was a crucial decision for he led the First Company of the Gabonese Army , the company of the other officers . Apparently at that moment he told his troops to perform average night maneuvers . That day , Gabonese chief of staff Albert Bernard ( later Omar ) Bongo informed President M 'ba that the number of troops outside Libreville was unusually high . M 'ba , however , did not think much of this anomaly .

= = Coup = =

During the night of 17 February and the early morning of 18 February 1964 , 150 members of the Gabonese military , gendarmerie , and police , headed by Lieutenant Jacques Mombo and Valère Essone , seized the presidential palace . The gendarmes on duty claimed that this was but a military exercise . However , during the " exercise " the lieutenants dragged President M 'ba from his bed at gunpoint . Bongo heard this noise and telephoned President of the National Assembly Louis Bigmann to find out what had happened . Bigmann arrived at the presidential palace and asked the rebels what Bongo had asked him . At this point they opened the gates and arrested him too . The plotters subsequently arrested every member of the Gabonese cabinet except the respected technician André Gustave Anguilé . Apparently , the plotters let him roam free in the hopes of him joining them , although before noon he asked to be arrested . Joseph N 'Goua , the Gabonese minister of foreign affairs , was able to tell the French Embassy of this before he was arrested .

The insurgents , calling themselves a " revolutionary committee " , spread themselves strategically across the Gabonese capital during the night . They shut down the airport and seized the post office and radio station . On Radio Libreville , the military announced that a coup had taken place and that they required " technical assistance " . They issued radio statements every half @-@ hour promising that " public liberties will be restored and all political prisoners will be freed " and ordered the French not to interfere in the matter , claiming that it would be a violation of their sovereignty . In addition , they decreed the closing of schools and businesses . M 'ba acknowledged his defeat in a radio broadcast , in accordance with orders from his captors . " D @-@ Day is here , the injustices are beyond measure , these people are patient , but their patience has limits " , he said . " It came to a boil . " [ c ]

During these events , no gunshots were fired . The public did not react strongly , which , according to the military , was a sign of approval . A provisional government was formed , composed of civilian politicians from the UDSG and BDG such as Philippe N 'dong , editor of Gabon 's literary review Réalités Gabonaises ; Dr. Eloi Chambrier , Gabon 's only physician ; Philippe Maury , a famous Gabonese actor ; and civil servant Paul Gondjout . Mbene stated that the provisional government would not include any members of the M 'ba government . He declared that Gabon 's pro @-@ French foreign policy would remain unchanged and that Mombo would supervise the government until the presidency was given to Aubame . The plotters were content to ensure security for civilians , urging them to remain calm and not hurt anyone . Most of them were junior officers , living in the army barracks . The senior officers did not intervene ; instead , they stayed in their " pleasant " houses .

Aubame was unaware of the coup until the French ambassador to Gabon , Paul Cousseran , called him on the telephone roughly a half @-@ hour after sunrise . Cousseran , meanwhile , was awoken by the noisy streets and checked to see what was happening . Aubame replied that he was to find out why there was " no government " , as Cousseran never directly mentioned a coup . However , about midway through the morning an automobile carrying the revolutionary committee arrived at Aubame 's residence and drove him to the governmental offices , where he had been named president .

Second Lieutenant Ndo Edou gave instructions to transfer M 'ba to Ndjolé , Aubame 's electoral stronghold . However , due to heavy rain , the deposed president and his captors took shelter in an unknown village . The next morning they decided to take him over the easier road to Lambaréné .

Several hours later , they returned to Libreville .

= = = French intervention = = =

French authorities first received information on the coup not from Cousseran but rather from Bongo , giving him some standing among them . President de Gaulle , upon advice from his chief adviser on African policy , Jacques Foccart , decided that he would restore the legitimate government . This was in accordance with a 1960 treaty between Gabon and the French , which was ironically signed by Aubame in his stint as Foreign Minister . Foccart , on the other hand , had only decided to launch the counter coup to protect the interests of the French petroleum group Elf , which operated in Gabon and was led by a close friend of his . M 'ba was also a close friend of his ; David Yates reports that M 'ba could call Foccart personally , and Foccart would meet with him " at a moment 's notice " . French commentators , however , claimed that if they did not intervene , they would be tempting other dissidents . France had refrained from intervening in recent coups in the French Congo , Dahomey , and Togo , despite being opposed to all of them . However , the Gabon coup differed in that , they claimed , it lacked notable public support . Following the restoration of M 'ba 's government in Gabon , the French intervened militarily in Africa roughly every other year . In 1995 , the French Minister for Foreign Assistance Jacques Godfrain explained that Paris " will intervene each time an elected democratic power is overthrown by a coup d 'état if a military cooperation agreement exists " .

Shortly after de Gaulle and Foccart 's meeting , French commanders Haulin and Royer were released at the request of the French Embassy . Intervention could not commence without a formal petition to the Head of State of Gabon . Since M 'ba was held hostage , the French contacted the Vice President of Gabon , Paul @-@ Marie Yembit , who had not been arrested . At the time , Yembit was in a car with U.S. ambassador Charles Darlington travelling to N 'Dende . This was to officially open a school built by the Peace Corps nearby , in Yembit 's birthplace of Moussambou , and completing his electoral campaign . Therefore , they decided to compose a predated letter that Yembit would later sign , confirming their intervention . They sent this to him via a small airplane , since there were no road bridges in Gabon at the time and the only way to cross a river was on a ferry . Yembit did not come back to Libreville on the plane as would be expected , but rather at 8 : 00 WAT on 18 February to read a statement over Radio Libreville that was likely prepared by French officials . Yembit , however , claimed that he called for French intervention while the insurgent troops held M 'ba hostage ; this version of the story was quickly disputed by several diplomats on the scene , as several French troops had arrived before this alleged incident .

Less than 24 hours after de Gaulle had been notified , French paratroopers stationed in Dakar and Brazzaville under General René Cogny and a General Kergaravat were notified that they were going to end the coup . This had come even before the provincial government was formed . Maurice Robert and Guy Ponsaille , who were among a group Foccart convened to discuss the French intervention , were part of the paratrooper unit . Receiving Foccart 's orders to " normalize " the situation by 19 February or the next day at the latest , at 10 : 50 WAT on 18 February , the first 50 troops landed at the Libreville International Airport . The rebels closed the airport but failed to establish obstacles , allowing the French troops to land unharmed , albeit during a large storm . Throughout that day , more than 600 paratroopers arrived at the airport .

Sweeping through Libreville unopposed , the troops easily captured the provincial council , though they met resistance at the Baraka military base in Lambaréné when they attacked at daylight . Upon learning of the impending attack , Aubame called Cousseran and asked him what had been going on . Cousseran dodged answering the question and requested that Aubame release M 'ba uninjured . After receiving the false assurance from the ambassador that the French government had no intention of restoring M 'ba to power , Aubame sent out a military officer to the countryside to find the deposed president . M 'ba was moved to a small village near the Albert Schweitzer Hospital . At dawn on 19 February , French Air Force planes strafed the rebels at Baraka , while the French Army attacked the insurgents with machine gun fire and mortars . The rebels at the military base promptly surrendered once their ammunition supply ran out , and their commander , Lieutenant Ndo Edou ,

was executed . Later , the French army managed to break through the gate to the village where M 'ba was held and rescued the deposed president .

Before the end of the day , the French troops surrounded all of Libreville 's public buildings . Shortly thereafter , Radio Libreville announced the surrender of the rebel forces . Kergaravat concluded his military operation on 20 February , saluting Cousseran and saying " Mission accomplie " . Over its course , one French soldier was killed and 18 died on the Gabonese side . Unofficial sources said two French soldiers and 25 insurgents were killed , with more than 40 Gabonese and four French troops were wounded . The number of civilian casualties was unknown but numerous , as the straw roofs on their homes were not a good protector against aerial bullets .

= = Aftermath = =

= = = Immediate aftermath and riots = = =

France 's intervention in the coup was openly applauded by the Central African Republic , Chad , Côte d 'Ivoire , Madagascar , Niger , and Upper Volta . In fact , France was barely criticised at all in Africa , other than a mild response by Dahomey and one by the Democratic Republic of Congo . The matter was not discussed at the next meeting of the Council of Ministers of the OAU , held on 24 February ? 29 February in Lagos . The revolutionary movement in French Africa immediately retrogressed following the coup .

M 'ba was returned to Libreville on 21 February . Shortly after his arrival , the 10 : 00 pm curfew that had been imposed by the French was lifted , and some stores were reopened . Squads of officials , known as " les gorilles " , travelled through Libreville and arrested any suspected M 'ba opposers . After his reinstatement , M 'ba refused to believe that the coup was directed against his regime , instead considering it to be a conspiracy against the state . Nonetheless , following the coup M 'ba dismissed every soldier in the army and started recruiting new men .

On 1 March , however , anti @-@ government demonstrations began , with protesters shouting " Léon M 'ba , président des Français ! " ( " Léon M 'ba , President of the French ! " ) and calling for the end of the " dictatorship " . Originating in Libreville , these demonstrations spread to Port @-@ Gentil and N 'Dende and lasted into the summer . When 1 @,@ 000 pro @-@ government demonstrators responded by shouting " Long Live Léon M 'ba " outside the presidential palace , they were attacked by dissidents . Among the pro @-@ government demonstrators were an opposition member , Martine Oyane , who had been forcefully undressed following her arrest , beaten by the police , paraded naked throughout Libreville , and forced to shout " Long Live Léon M 'ba " . At the height of these demonstrations , 3 @,@ 000 to 4 @,@ 000 Gabonese protested throughout central Libreville . Protesters also took their anger out against the French in Gabon , stoning more than 30 cars belonging to Frenchmen and chanting " Go home , go home ! " This rioting was so intense that M 'ba announced that whoever went to work would not be paid . The French reacted to these incidents by swinging rifle butts and throwing grenades . The crowds responded by throwing bottles and stones , though they were put down soon after . There were no reports of injured protesters , despite orders to the Gabonese police that they fire at protesters on sight .

= = = Allegations of U.S. involvement = = =

Some Gabonese mistakenly identified the United States as a co @-@ conspirator in the coup . Time asserted that French officials helped spread the rumor of American involvement . This reached a point which some automobile stations refused to help Darlington and other Americans . After William F. Courtney , deputy chief of the United States Embassy , received a call from a man identifying himself as DuPont and threatening an imminent attack , a hand grenade exploded outside the embassy . The explosion , which occurred at a time when the building was closed and locked on 3 March , resulted in damage to the embassy sign and the cracking of two windows .

Following the bombing , French Gabonese made more threatening phone calls to the embassy . A

second bomb exploded at the embassy two nights later , causing no damage . A drive @-@ by shooting , during which at least five rounds of buckshot were fired from a 12 @-@ gauge automatic shotgun , riddled the second story windows with over 30 holes . It is likely that its perpetrators were French , as Gabonese have no access to grenades . Following the second bombing a car containing white men was noticed , driving through otherwise empty Shore Boulevard . At the time , practically the only white men in Gabon were French .

Two Gabonese policemen were assigned to protect the building , and M 'ba ordered an investigation into the bombings . He denounced the allegations against Americans , saying :

Nothing permits to determine that the United States played a role in the recent events . However , relations of friendship existing between members of the United States Embassy and some politicians who participated in the rebellion could have given this impression to some , an impression which I do not share .

Many of these attacks against Americans were against Darlington personally . His son Christopher was hit by a grenade in July , though it did not detonate . The ambassador resigned his post on 26 July . It was not until 14 August 1965 that David M. Bane replaced him .

= = = 1964 elections = = =

Despite these incidents , legislative elections planned before the coup were held in April 1964 . They were originally to be held on 23 February , though he dissolved the National Assembly and rescheduled them for 12 April . Upon insistence of the French , M 'ba allowed opposition candidates to run , which it claimed was the main reason for starting the coup in the first place . However , their leaders were barred from participating because of their involvement in the coup , and known anti @-@ Mba organizers were deported to remote parts of the country . In addition , M 'ba was known to have bribed voters with banknotes .

France closely followed the election , deporting a Peace Corps teacher . The UDSG disappeared from the political scene , and M 'ba 's opposition was composed of parties that lacked national focus and maintained only regional or pro @-@ democracy platforms . Nevertheless , the opposition garnered 46 % of the vote and 16 of 47 seats in the assembly , while the BDG received 54 % of the vote and 31 seats . The opposition disputed this , and held strikes across the country , though these did not have a sizable impact on business .

= = = Lambaréné trial and rest of M 'ba 's term = = =

Aubame and Gondjout fled Libreville , but were captured sometime before 20 February . Most of the other rebels took refuge at the U.S. Embassy , though they were soon discovered and brought to jail . That August , a trial of the military rebels and provisional government was opened in Lambaréné . A " state of precatons " was imposed , which decreed that local government kept surveillance on suspected troublemakers and , if necessary , order curfew , while special permits were required to travel through the town . The trial was held in a school building overlooking the Ogooue River , which was near Albert Schweitzer 's hospital . Space at the hearing was limited , so members of the public were disallowed from attending . Permits were required to attend the trial , and family members were restricted to one permit each . Press coverage was limited , and journalists were allowed only if they represented a high @-@ profile news agency . In addition , there were restrictions on the defence of the accused .

The prosecution called 64 separate witnesses . Essone , Mbene , and Aubame claimed that their involvement in the coup was due to a lack of development in the Gabonese army . Judge Leon Auge , the judge in the case , said that if " that is the only reason for your coup d'état , you deserve a severe penalty . " Essone said that almost all Gabonese military officers knew of an imminent coup beforehand , while Aubame affirmed his position that he did not participate in its planning . According to him , he formed the provisional government in a constitutional manner , and at the request of some " putschists " . He reasoned that the French intervention was effectively an illegal act of interference , an assertion which Gondjout and the former education minister , Jean Marc

Ekoh , shared . Ekoh had served as Foreign Minister during the coup . The Gabonese actor said that it should be the French troops being tried , not he and his comrades : " If we 'd been able to put up a few more Gabonese soldiers against the French , we 'd have won ? and we shouldn 't be here today . "

On 9 September , without consulting M 'ba , Leon Auge handed down a verdict which acquitted both Ekoh and Gondjout ; although the charges carried the death sentence as a maximum . Aubame was sentenced to 10 years of hard labor and 10 years of exile on a remote island off Settecama , 100 miles ( 161 km ) down the coast of Gabon , as were most criminals of the case . He was not particularly popular during his political career , though according to Time , his arrest " ballooned him to heroic proportions in the eyes of the aroused public " . While serving his 10 years of labor , he was beaten regularly by prison guards . Besides Aubame , M 'ba imprisoned more than 150 of his opponents , most of whom were sentenced to 20 years of hard labor . These included the two officers and Aubame 's nephew , Pierre Eyeguet , a former ambassador to the United Kingdom . The actor and the doctor were given 10 years of imprisonment each . While appealing for peace on 18 February , he pledged " no pardon or pity " to his enemies , but rather " total punishment " .

Two years after the coup there was still open repression of dissent in Gabon . Following these events M 'ba became increasingly reclusive , staying in his presidential palace protected by French troops known as the " Clan des Gabonais " . Not even Yembit was close to him , but Foccart 's friends Ponsaille and Robert " were never far " from M 'ba , according to Pean , and provided the aging president with counseling and advice . M 'ba was , however , still convinced of his popularity . Three years later , M 'ba was diagnosed with cancer , and he died on 28 November 1967 . After M 'ba 's death , French @-@ supported Bongo succeeded him as president , and released Aubame in 1972 .