This report is part of the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Transformation Index (BTI) 2016. It covers the period from 1 February 2013 to 31 January 2015. The BTI assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of political management in 129 countries. More on the BTI at http://www.bti-project.org.


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Executive Summary

During the period under review, the transformation of the Republic of the Congo (also known as Congo-Brazzaville) was marked by the continuous political supremacy of the regime and party of President Sassou Nguesso, slow diversification and lukewarm liberalization of the oil-dominated economy.

Regarding political transformation, corrupted democratic procedures, the 2012 National Assembly elections as well as the 2014 local and partial senatorial elections reinforced the power of the regime, which had earlier been consolidated by the 2009 presidential election. Elections also contributed to stabilizing the state’s authority. Despite the utilization of the ballot box, however, the regime remained de facto autocratic, based on repression, human rights violations, corruption and the co-option of politicians who only pretended to perform a moderate opposition. The elections were marred by low voter turnouts, boycotts by opposition parties as well as manipulation by the regime. While the state had consolidated for some years without major incidents of violence (after a bloody civil war), the period under review was overshadowed by four episodes of trouble: the explosion catastrophe of March 2012 that destroyed parts of Brazzaville and killed about 300 people; the bloody December 2013 clash (about 40 casualties) between state security forces and the bodyguard of a dissident military officer who was blamed for the 2012 catastrophe; the violent deportations of several hundred thousand DRC nationals between April and July 2014; and the growing likelihood that the government will amend the constitution to permit Sassou Nguesso a third presidential term in 2016. However, the overall political situation of the regime remained strong enough to survive the period under review without deep scratches. The political transformation process can be termed a caricature of democracy, which props up an authoritarian and largely personalized regime that relies on clientelistic networks, corruption and the threat of repression. The opposition remains weak and unable to challenge the government effectively. The regime, dominated by citizens from President Denis Sassou Nguesso’s home region, has been able to uphold its position against potential challengers with divisive bait-and-switch tactics. In sum, transformation produced no substantial progress toward democracy.
As regards economic transformation, oil continued to dominate the economy, foreign exchange generation and public finance in the period under review. During this time, economic development was fostered by favorable oil prices and high international demand of oil products, which translated into high foreign exchange income and state revenue until 2014, when the demand and prices for oil followed an unexpectedly swift downward trend, threatening the Congolese economy like a sword of Damocles. As a consequence, the Sassou Nguesso regime may be forced to seek the support of the IMF, particularly if China proves reticent to extend even more credit to the regime. Previously, the Republic of the Congo had applied economic policies along IMF conditionality up to 2011, but then deviated from IMF dogmatism as it felt strong enough to do so, given the favorable price, demand and income situation of the oil economy at that time. Although the regime retained some elements of IMF conditionality during the period under review, it essentially moved to economic policies that meant, inter alia, less austerity, increasing debt and a negative current account. The implementation of market economy policies remained slow. Public debt and external debt followed an upward trend, jeopardizing the economic improvements that the Republic of the Congo had achieved in 2010, when it benefited from substantial debt relief granted by international creditors with the cooperation of the IMF. Despite high oil revenue, growth rates of the GDP were meager in 2012 and 2013 (just over 3% each).

Given the halfhearted approach of the Sassou Nguesso regime towards political and economic transformation and the weakness of the Congolese opposition, progress (towards transformation) could most probably be stimulated by external pressure from the IMF, the World Bank and other major donors, rather than by domestic forces.

History and Characteristics of Transformation

The political and economic transformation of the Republic of the Congo began in 1990-1991. Domestic and external pressures combined to force the self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist government of General Denis Sassou Nguesso to take steps in the direction of major political and economic change. Given the country’s historical burdens and structural weaknesses, transformation became an extremely conflict-ridden affair, inciting power struggles, political violence and civil war, which caused considerable destruction of infrastructure, serious disruption of parts of the economy and tremendous hardships for a substantial portion of the population.

The country’s political conflicts began in 1960, when it won its independence from France. Ethnic rivalry, social and regional disparities, and mounting power struggles over the control of oil, the main export product, all resulted in two decades of political instability and crisis, including military coups and political murders. Although in 1970 a Marxist-Leninist “People’s Republic” under the one-party rule of the Parti Congolaise du Travail (PCT) was established, the country became politically stable for a decade only after Sassou Nguesso seized power in 1979. After the fall of several eastern European communist and African autocratic governments in 1989-1990, the Sassou Nguesso regime officially renounced Marxist-Leninist ideology and acquiesced to popular demands for a multiparty system in 1991, changing the name of the country from the “People’s
Republic” to the “Republic of the Congo.” In the elections of 1992 and 1993, Sassou Nguesso and the PCT lost power to a coalition of political parties under the leadership of Pascal Lissouba and his Union Panafricaine pour la Démocratie Sociale (UPADS). After a brief but bloody civil war, Sassou Nguesso was able to return to power in 1997, owing to both decisive military support from Angola and political backing from France. Thereafter, the anti-Sassou Nguesso militia were no match for the regime’s military might, and the government has been able to impose a “national dialogue” and peace regulations on them since 2001. In January 2002, a new multiparty constitution was endorsed by a national referendum. This constitution, like that of the 1990s, included articles concerning the separation of powers, multiparty rule, civil liberties and human rights, but it also strengthened the president’s position. Subsequently, Sassou Nguesso and his PCT-led coalition won the 2002 elections, mainly due to electoral fraud and widespread voter abstention. The elections, which were overshadowed by ongoing violence in the Pool region, enabled Sassou Nguesso and his political allies to establish and maintain a strong authoritarian-style government. In 2003 and 2007, the Brazzaville regime was able to impose peace agreements on the Pool region militia, which was headed by a Pentecostal clergyman and military commander, known as “Pasteur Ntoumi.”

Acting within a corruption-prone political system shaped by his will to remain in power, Sassou Nguesso has been able to reinforce his power in every election since 2007 (2009 presidential election, 2007 and 2012 National Assembly elections, 2008, 2011 and 2014 partial senatorial elections). With its carrot-and-stick approach, in which both oil revenues as well as the threat of military force are employed, the confident regime has successfully integrated (“moderate”) opposition politicians and erstwhile enemies, including Ntoumi, into its system. The death of several prominent opposition leaders, including Bernard Kolélas (2009) and Andre Milongo (2007), has indirectly strengthened the regime. Former President Lissouba, who continues to live in exile, and his UPADS political party also pose no genuine oppositional threat to the regime.

However, recent incidents of violence once again shed light on existing conflict potentials in the country. In December 2013, a gun battle left almost 40 people dead in Brazzaville when government forces clashed with the bodyguard of former Lieutenant Colonel Marcel Ntsourou, who fell out of favor with the regime. The officer, who had been a key figure in Sassou Nguesso’s return to power in 1997, was held responsible for the military arms depot explosion catastrophe of March 2012, which killed about 300 people and devastated substantial parts of Brazzaville. In interviews, Ntsourou accused Sassou Nguesso of rampant corruption and of ordering the so-called Beach Massacre of 1999, when more than 350 returned refugees, who had obviously been killed by the regime, “disappeared.” Ntsourou was arrested, allegedly tortured and later sentenced to a life of forced labor in September 2014.

Violence has cast a long shadow over the country’s political transformation. Efforts to transform the country’s economy, which is dominated by the export of oil, from a highly state-interventionist (“socialist”) system to a more market-oriented system have been thwarted by these conflicts, but also by the leverage of strong vested interests of the state elite headed by Sassou Nguesso. His regime, beginning to feel the weight of massive external debt and pressures to diversify the economy in order to facilitate reconstruction and economic development, reluctantly
acknowledged the need to approach the IMF for help. Although the government subordinated its policies to IMF conditionality by mid-term loan arrangements in 2004 and 2008, economic transformation toward a market economy has been sluggish and fraught with setbacks while poverty and unemployment have challenged the political stability of the country.

Massive debt relief, granted by international creditors in 2010, provided some financial reprieve for the Republic of the Congo. However, once the 2008 loan agreement with the IMF expired in 2011, the government decided to continue without a formal follow-up IMF arrangement, as the country benefited from high oil revenue in the 2010-2013 period and generous loans from China. Although the government has made modest efforts to diversify its economy – the centerpiece of which is the Special Economic Zone initiative – economic efficiency has consistently been sacrificed for political interests, discouraging foreign investors in the process.
The BTI combines text analysis and numerical assessments. The score for each question is provided below its respective title. The scale ranges from 1 (worst) to 10 (best).

Transformation Status

I. Political Transformation

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The government’s monopoly on the use of force is intact in most regions within the Republic of the Congo. There are instances in which members of the security forces act independently of government authority, committing what have been on occasion serious human rights abuses.

Following years of war and violence, the Pool region has been largely reintegrated into the state as a result of the 2003 and 2007 peace deals. From October 2010, the Congolese military has been able to move to parts of the Pool region that had been “no-go” areas for many years. Moreover, the government implemented a program to reintegrate disbanded militia members into civilian life as well as a program to rebuild and develop the distorted region. However, risks regarding local security remain, given the still virulent ethnic, regional and social cleavages that led to the violent conflict in the 1990s.

More recently, resulting partly from bloody conflict in neighboring Central African Republic, northern parts of the Republic of the Congo close to the CAR border have become a region of possible violent incursions beyond the control of Congolese state authorities. The problematic region stretches as far as the Odzala-Kokoua National Park, the site of a violent attack in April 2014 by disgruntled local residents, which has officially been played down as a singular incident.

In December 2013, clashes between government forces and the bodyguard of renegade Colonel Marcel Ntsourou in Brazzaville lent evidence to the possibility that, at times, state authority and the state’s monopoly on the use of force may be challenged, even in the vicinity of the headquarters of the government.
Constitutionally and legally, all people born in the Republic of the Congo are citizens. While citizenship itself is not disputed, major discrimination patterns between the country’s ethnic groups are common. According to the constitution, Congolese citizens are allowed to change their nationality or to adopt the citizenship of another country without losing their Congolese citizenship. Indigenous people, so-called Pygmies (or Baka), suffer systematic discrimination that amounts to a withholding of citizenship rights. However, in recent years the government has undertaken steps to improve the situation of this group – especially its children – in reaction to international (United Nations) pressure. While minority rights were legally codified in 2011, minorities continue to suffer under unsatisfactory living conditions and are often forcefully denied access to markets as both buyers and sellers.

In recent years, the Sassou Nguesso government has come to be more dominated by Cuvette regionals – Cuvette is Sassou Nguesso’s home region – than ever before. This trend is especially pronounced at the top levels of the military and more sensitive ministerial and parastatal positions. Southerners generally have access only to the least important ministerial portfolios. All this, however, represents a problem in executing the rule of law rather than citizenship.

The constitution provides for the separation of church and state, and Article 18 unequivocally forbids the use of religion for political aims. Although most political elites are Catholic, the Church’s leadership hails mostly from southern regions, and hence exerts relatively little influence on the government leadership. Indeed, as several prominent Catholic leaders have voiced their opposition to a constitutional revision that would enable Sassou Nguesso to serve a third presidential term starting in 2016, the relationship between the Catholic Church and the regime has grown increasingly tense.

Notwithstanding the dominance of the Catholic Church, the social influence of other Christian denominations – such as Protestantism, Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism – is growing. Yet, it is very difficult to detect any political influence by such movements thus far on the Sassou Nguesso government. In total, the population is largely Christianized, although remnants of traditional African religions remain strong, especially in rural areas. About 2% of the population practices Islam, mostly in Brazzaville.

Administrative and public security systems are in place, and the Sassou Nguesso government continues to strengthen its presence in regional hinterlands. However, the performance of state administration is impaired by corruption, low professional skills, ethnic rivalries and heterogeneous state structures. The government has displayed little interest in decentralization, which would disperse some power to local and regional governments; state authority thus remains a highly centralized affair, the better for Sassou Nguesso’s government to control the flow of state revenue.
Subsequently, the economic and social infrastructure the state provides is highly lopsided. While most of the public resources are directed to the main urban centers of Brazzaville and the oil metropolis Pointe-Noire, as well as to the transport and communication axis interconnecting the two cities, much of the country remains a neglected zone, with the remarkable exception of the area closer to the home of the Sassou Nguesso family clan in the north.

The state has shown significant neglect for the lower sections of Congolese society. For instance, close to 30% of the population lacks access to improved drinking water sources, while less than 20% have access to improved sanitation facilities.

2 | Political Participation

The 2002 constitution calls for free and fair elections with universal suffrage, but elections organized within that framework have been corrupted by both the regime’s dominance and the opposition’s weakness, which was a major feature in all elections since 2002, including the 2009 presidential, the 2012 National Assembly and the 2014 (partial) senatorial elections. There was no election that had the potential to challenge the supremacy of the PCT and President Sassou Nguesso, who consistently refrained from promoting an open, competitive multiparty system. According to international observers, the regime’s commitment to holding free and fair elections remained poor. There is no independent electoral commission. The body that organizes and oversees elections is called the Commission nationale d’organisation des élections (Conel). Opposition parties do not accept it as mediator, as it is largely controlled by the PCT regime.

Parties and individuals who want to participate in the political process have influence only if they work within the framework imposed by the regime. Opposition parties and civic organizations wield very limited power. Opposition candidates suffer from low funding and inadequate organization, and they also receive less media coverage. Elections in the Republic of the Congo are best described as forced consent to the regime, as the extremely low levels of turnout – usually between 10% and 20% – reflect.

In most cases, the regime does not publish official data concerning voter turnout. If it does so, as in the 2009 presidential election, the official turnout (66.4% in that case) is ardently disputed by independent civil society groups and longtime diplomats. International monitors – save those from African countries very friendly to the regime – are virtually never permitted.
Given the supremacy of the regime in electoral procedures, the government is not elected democratically in a real sense. Supported by expanding oil and timber revenue, the government rules quite effectively, including in the historically unstable Pool region. Since the military’s leadership is dominated by Sassou Nguesso’s family or longtime allies and its mid-level officer corps is dominated by Cuvette regionals, it is highly unlikely that the military would act as a veto power. In 2013, the clash of the regime with dissident military officer Marcel Ntsourou remained an isolated affair, as Ntsourou did not get any major support from within the military.

Moreover, with the increasing willingness of the Chinese government to provide loans with no political conditions, the international community has less leverage over the Sassou Nguesso government than at any point in recent memory. As a result, Sassou Nguesso is widely expected to pursue a constitutional revision that would enable him to stand for “election” when his current, and second, term expires in 2016.

According to the constitution, political and civil society organizations can form freely. However, the political system is shaped in favor of those organizations close to the regime. Organizations representing interests contrary to those of the regime are allowed to exist provided they do not challenge Sassou Nguesso’s authority and democratic legitimacy, however illusory.

Labor legislation provides for basic trade union rights, excluding some groups such as state employees. However, there is a huge gap between theory and practice regarding the implementation of trade union rights, including the bargaining for wage increases or better working conditions. Intimidation and arrests of workers by the police occur regularly in labor disputes. For instance, in January 2014, members of teacher trade unions (Concertation pour la revalorisation de la profession d’enseignants / CPRE; Coordination syndicale libre des enseignants du Congo / COSYLEC) became targets of harassment and intimidation by security forces when they chose to protest against the government for not abiding by its commitments recorded in agreements with the unions. More recently, the Citizen Movement for Respect of the Constitutional Order has been frequently denied the right to protest the regime’s efforts to engineer a constitutional revision.

The civilian political opposition is fragmented into more than 100 organizations, and remains too weak to confront the government effectively.

According to the constitution, opinions may be expressed freely by citizens, political and civil society organizations as well as the mass media, including those based online. In reality, this freedom is restricted and regulated when it comes to criticism of the regime and its political priorities. However, the authorities allow moderate criticism as an outlet to ease political tensions, provided it does not challenge the legitimacy of Sassou Nguesso’s rule. Some journalists tend to practice self-censorship. In 2014, the Republic of the Congo ranked 82nd out of 180 countries in
Reporters Without Borders’ World Press Freedom Ranking and 122nd out of 197 countries in the Freedom House’s Global Press Freedom Rankings, which classified the country as “partly free” (a label which may overstate the extent of freedom of expression, at least in the meaning of the wording). This rating will almost certainly fall, for in late 2014 the government physically assaulted and then deported two prominent journalists who opposed Sassou Nguesso’s efforts to engineer a constitutional revision.

There are about 100 small private newspapers, which are concentrated in Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire. Many of them lack critical distance from the regime and are funded by regime loyalists, while those that are not have recently faced arbitrary suspensions of between three months and a year, and in one case even forced to close indefinitely. Dépêches de Brazzaville, the only daily, is operated by Sassou Nguesso allies and funded with oil revenue. The government has not loosened its grip on the broadcast sector and continues to run the Radiodiffusion-Télévision Congolaise (RTC); members of the Sassou Nguesso family or ruling circle operate the country’s other major TV stations. The political profile of private radio remains generally low, and the dominant stations are owned by political elites. Political parties are not permitted to run their own radio or television programs. Internet sites that are radically critical of the regime can only operate outside the country. Individuals and groups can express anti-regime sentiments via the Internet, including e-mail, inside the country, but many longtime diplomats believe the Chinese government is helping the Sassou Nguesso regime strengthen its electronic surveillance capacity.

3 | Rule of Law

The 2002 constitution provides for the separation of powers, including an independent judicial system and an effective “fourth power,” the media. In practice, however, there are no adequate checks and balances for these powers, since President Sassou Nguesso and his political allies dominate all sectors of the political, judicial and media systems, including the government, both chambers of the national parliament, the Constitutional Court, other high-level courts and the broadcast media. Control mechanisms exercised by the legislative powers, the courts or the media are almost nonexistent (or exist only on paper). Political decision-making remains in the hands of the president and his closest advisers and allies in the PCT and associated political parties. Constitutionally, the president cannot be removed from office by a parliamentary vote. On the other hand, the president is not allowed to dissolve the parliament, though given the extent to which he dominates it, he has little interest in doing so.
While the judiciary is independent in theory, in practice it continues to be overburdened, underfinanced and subject both to political influence and corruption. In general, it is wholly politically compliant to the Sassou Nguesso regime. From time to time, politically motivated judgments are handed down against regime opponents (e.g., in the cases of former presidents Pascal Lissouba and Joachim Yhombi-Opango, former Prime Minister Bernard Kolélas and quite likely Colonel Marcel Ntsourou). Moreover, after years of civil war and political instability, the technical capacities of the judiciary are still weak. There is a serious lack of trained staff able to work effectively when it comes to administering the rule of law. As a consequence of the weaknesses of the “modern” system, traditional courts retain broad jurisdiction, particularly in rural areas.

In theory, officeholders may be prosecuted under criminal law in cases involving corruption, abuse of power and high treason. In practice, however, evidence of such prosecution is extremely limited. If prosecution occurs, it is almost certainly motivated by Sassou Nguesso’s desire to remove and weaken potential competitors than by the desire to strengthen the rule of law. Critics of corruption are more likely to be punished than corrupt lawbreakers.

Civil liberties (e.g., freedom of the press, of expression, assembly and religious affiliation) are guaranteed by the constitution. Yet although the general human rights record of the Republic of the Congo has improved since 2002, it still remains poor. Nevertheless, the government claims to be committed to improving human rights and civil liberties by creating a National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and renaming the Ministry of Justice the “Ministry of Justice and Human Rights.” However, this approach lacks credibility, as both are dominated by Sassou Nguesso loyalists.

The Republic of the Congo still numbers among those countries that inflict the death penalty. Nevertheless, capital punishment is currently not being carried out, according to Amnesty International. In addition to having the death penalty, human rights violations remain serious, including politically motivated arrests, physical abuse, torture, perpetrator impunity etc. Sometimes armed non-state actors also threaten the human rights and civil liberties of Congolese citizens. As is traditional in Congolese society, women and children suffer considerably from discrimination and violence, including sexual harassment, rape, compulsory labor, forced prostitution and human trafficking. The state does not protect them effectively. Despite formal legislation to codify the rights of people, there is strong discrimination against ethnic minorities, including some 300,000 non-Bantu Pygmies. In most regions of the country, local ethnic majority populations discriminate against local ethnic minority groups. Since the state does not protect the population, citizens sometimes resort to vigilante justice, including killing suspected criminals. It remains very difficult in the Republic of the Congo for citizens to get justice for human rights violations committed by state actors. For instance, the families of 353 refugees who
“disappeared” without a trace in the 1999 “Beach” incident on their return to the Republic of the Congo in vain tried to gain legal clearance of criminal wrongdoing by armed state actors.

4 | Stability of Democratic Institutions

Despite its essentially undemocratic character, the institutions of the executive and legislative branches, the government and parliament are relatively stable, buoyed largely by the influx of oil, timber and metallic raw materials revenue. Indeed, any future instability is more likely to result from a power vacuum in the event of Sassou Nguesso’s incapacitation than from public frustration – however justified – at elite corruption. Public administration and the judiciary suffer from pervasive corruption, a lack of professionalism and poor performance. State institutions are generally regarded as illegitimate, though the Congolese population has little recourse.

Given the very low democratic choice in elections, the Brazzaville regime can be classified as an authoritarian-style government, disguised in a democratic façade. The stability of the Republic of the Congo’s institutions has been reinforced by the 2009 presidential election, 2012 National Assembly elections and the 2014 local elections (followed by partial senatorial elections), which featured no real competition from any political opposition. Owing to intimidation in the unfavorable political climate of the country, a large part of the population is unable or unwilling to challenge the stability of the institutions. However, powerful vested interests within the PCT framework, including the military, may be a matter of concern, particularly as Sassou Nguesso attempts to usher in a new, younger generation of political elites, particularly dominated by Cuvette regionals who owe their privileged positions entirely to him. These concerns may grow as the 2016 presidential elections approach. If Sassou Nguesso opts to amend the constitution, the more ambitious members of the PCT and leaders of allied political parties will likely be frustrated. Given the depth of popular unrest a constitutional revision would elicit, these frustrated erstwhile allies could foster widespread popular protests against the regime. If, on the other hand, Sassou Nguesso steps down, political competition among aspirants – particularly well-funded northern politicians, who for years siphoned funds from the state treasury – could easily turn violent.
5 | Political and Social Integration

A heterogeneous and fragile multiparty system emerged from the transformation process of the early 1990s that was fragmented along ethnic, communal and regional lines. From the civil-war years of 1997 to 2002, the former single-state party, the PCT, has been able to restore its political supremacy in the country by co-opting many small parties and corruptible “independents” as well as repressing the remaining opposition. The PCT further consolidated its position by creating the PCT-dominated Rassemblement de la Majorité Présidentielle (RMP) in 2007. In the 2012 National Assembly elections, the PCT alone gained 89 out of 139 seats in the National Assembly while parties co-opted by the PCT obtained 28 more seats; while only 19 seats, including 12 independents and seven senate members of the UPADS did not adhere to the PCT caucus. (Three seats remained vacant, as the elections were postponed in three constituencies of Brazzaville afflicted by the March 2012 explosion catastrophe.) In the senate, the PCT alliance garnered 34 out of 36 seats and 36 out of 38 seats in the 2011 and 2014 partial elections, respectively, with UPADS winning two seats in each case. Other opposition parties like the Union pour la Démocratie et la République-Mwinda (UDR-MWINDA), the Union Patriotique pour le Renouveau National (UPRN) or the Parti Social-Démocrate du Congo (PSDC) failed to win parliamentary representation in the 2011, 2012 and 2014 elections. Thus, the only opposition party represented in the two chambers is the UPADS, founded by former Congolese president Lissouba. In the 2014 local elections that preceded the partial renewal of the senate, the PCT caucus garnered 94% of the political mandates, including all départements and the mairies of Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire, while UPADS only prevailed in the small town of Mossendjo. Given the predominance of the PCT, the political reality in the Republic of the Congo comes close to a one-party system despite a variety of small, poorly financed political organizations.

A large part of former opposition parties has been co-opted into the presidential system, attracted by the oil-wealth allocations offered by the regime. For instance, the Mouvement Congolais pour la Démocratie et le Développement Intégral (MCDDI), the Rassemblement de la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (RDPS) and the Union des Forces Démocratiques (UFD) eventually chose to cooperate with the PCT. Since the MCDDI, which was founded by the late Bernard Kolélas, has a strong constituency within the Baïongo ethnic group and in Brazzaville, this party is especially important to Sassou Nguesso for the purpose of national reconciliation, which he administers via a patronage-based system. Owing to Kolélas’ enduring legacy and the presidential ambitions of his son, Parfait Kolélas, the relationship with the MCDDI remains uneasy, although the party has been weakened by a split in 2013 when the Dynamique Républicaine pour le Développement (DRD) was founded by prominent renegade MCDDI politician Hellot Matson Mampouya. With
Mampouya’s departure, the hold of Parfait Kolélas over his party is now unchallenged, despite his relatively shallow popular support, even in the Pool region. Other PCT-associated parties like the RDPS, the UFD, the Mouvement Action Renouveau (MAR), the Mouvement pour l’Unité, la Solidarité et le Travail (MUST) and the Rassemblement Citoyen (RC) have succumbed to promises of oil revenue.

The viability of some oppositional alliances such as the Front des Parties de l’Opposition Congolaise (FPOC, 2009; more than 20 parties) or the (smaller) Collectif des Parties de l’Opposition Congolaise (2012: twelve parties) remain limited, even though UPADS took part. Many of the opposition parties are burdened with internal problems, including a lack of resources, organization and personnel as well as internal frictions and leadership struggles. They are further undermined by the divide-and-rule tactics of the PCT. Moreover, many parties seem to be one-man shows, without any major constituency.

In general, the political opposition outside the PCT-dominated alliance appears weak and fragmented, reducing the checks and balances on the executive in the country. None of the opposition parties enjoys a powerful political base at the national level. Political parties and alliances are largely based on regional frameworks, although there are few real policy differences between them. For the most part, the leadership of opposition parties and alliances appears almost as personalized and autocratic as it is at PCT level.

If Sassou Nguesso pursues a constitutional revision that would enable him to retain power, Congolese citizens could jettison the party system altogether and engage in widespread popular protests.

The regime’s stranglehold on power seriously impairs the ability of CSOs to mediate between social forces and the political system. The topography of interest groups is meager, and important social interests (e.g., those of informal-sector workers, the rural population and women) are underrepresented. The trade unions, including the PCT-friendly Confédération Syndicale des Travailleurs Congolais (CSTC), the Confédération des Syndicats du Congo (CSC) and the Confédération des Syndicats Libres et Autonomes du Congo (COSYLAC), focus on basic issues important to their members, but they try to avoid direct political conflicts.

In the area of human rights, organizations such as the Observatoire Congolais des Droits de l’Homme (OCDH) are striving to establish themselves as independent and trustworthy forces, but they have to act carefully in order to avoid repression; even mild dissent earns physical intimidation. Some of the most influential players are Catholic Church leaders – the Archbishop of Brazzaville is particularly important here – who have stressed the importance of national reconciliation and criticized, for instance, the lack of transparency and accountability in the handling of state resources, particularly oil. The Sassou Nguesso regime has gone so far as to create the Federation Congolaise des Droits de l’Homme (FECODHO), ostensibly a human-rights organization; its primary task is to counter the OCDH’s criticisms.
There is no clear empirical evidence regarding citizens’ consent to democratic norms. Given the very limited democratic scope of elections under Sassou Nguesso, official voter turnout rates of 77.5% at the 2002 constitutional referendum, 74.7% at the 2002 presidential election or 66.4% at the 2009 presidential election are subject to a high level of suspicion. Foreign diplomats and local opposition groups have estimated voter participation in the 2007 and 2012 parliamentary elections as well as in the 2014 local elections to be very low. The opposition spoke about abstention rates of 80% to 95% in the 2012 National Assembly election. If this data is correct, it indicates an urgent desire for real choices instead of a caricature of democracy when it comes to elections.

The unwillingness to support the voting procedures imposed on the Congolese electorate by the government should not be misinterpreted as a lack of consent to democratic norms. Rather, staying away from the ballot box almost certainly indicated a high degree of frustration, disillusionment and silent protest among a growing majority of the people.

Poverty, along with a low standard of economic and social development in the non-oil sectors of the country, has impaired the ability of individuals and society to organize. With the country’s oil revenues allocated almost entirely to the country’s political elite – as well as infrastructure improvements pursued mostly for their benefit – the vast majority of the population is forced to rely on the informal sector and subsistence agriculture to survive. Extended families, village communities and women’s groups are major frameworks of solidarity and self-organization. There are also several organizations working, inter alia, in the youth, human rights and environmental fields. While none of them appears to be able to challenge the supremacy of the Congolese regime effectively, they offer some useful societal frameworks and social services for people in need. Within these forms of self-organization, interpersonal trust appears to be relatively high. On a more national scale, however, matters are very different: due to the increasing dominance of Cuvette regionals in high-level political positions and economic affairs, as well as the legacy of the violent civil war, southerners and northerners are extremely distrustful of each other, more commonly viewing each other as adversaries to be defeated rather than as compatriots.
II. Economic Transformation

6 | Level of Socioeconomic Development

Despite the progress in infrastructure reconstruction following the civil war, the Republic of the Congo continues to face enormous economic and social challenges left over from years of conflict and political turbulence. The Sassou Nguesso regime has generally resisted the efforts of international creditors to help create a strong market economy characterized by transparency in public management and strong property rights. During the period under review, progress toward a more market-oriented economy has been continuously slow (temporarily ridden by setbacks) due largely to tepid political will. Indeed, given the government’s relative failure to diversify the country’s economy, it remains subject to volatility in global commodities markets. Although the government did not renew the mid-term IMF agreement that expired in 2011, it managed to attain EITI status as a compliant country in February 2013, to the surprise of both diplomats and civil society. Reflecting the regime’s economic mismanagement, the World Bank rates Congo as among the most challenging business climates in the world, which was ranked 185th out of 189 countries in the 2012 Doing Business survey. In 2013, the oil sector, the transparency of which has long been criticized by international creditors and civil society, accounted for 58% of GDP, 82% of exports and 73% of government revenue. In the UNDP HDI of 2014, the Republic of the Congo attained an HDI value of 0.564, ranking 140th out of 187 countries. In 2012, the combined gross enrollment ratio has been estimated at 66.1%, while the share of girls in secondary school enrollment has been estimated at 46%. The income Gini coefficient was 47.3 in 2011, while the Gender Inequality Index (GII) was 0.617 in 2013. Some 12.2% of the population lived in a situation assessed as severe poverty by international standards in 2011. According to FAO data, almost one-third of the population suffered from malnutrition in the 2012-2014 period. A very tiny class of people in the state elite, the military and business circles can be perceived as rich, while the middle class is also small.

The Republic of the Congo continues to be wracked by severe social, economic and regional disparities that are a consequence of its one-sided integration into the global market economy, corruption and incompetence in government and economic management.

The very important hydrocarbon (oil and gas) sector is a very capital-intensive industry with low labor requirements. The sector remains a world-market-oriented
enclave in the country, with only low trickle-down effects for the majority of the population. In 2013, the non-oil sectors, including agriculture, fisheries, forestry, mining, industries and services, contributed only 42% of GDP, while a large majority of the working force has been trying to earn a living outside the hydrocarbon sector. Much of the non-oil-based GDP is generated in the informal sector. Despite the marginal GDP share of agriculture (5%), a substantial share (35%) of the population still lives and works in rural areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Indicators</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>$ M</td>
<td>6087.0</td>
<td>12007.9</td>
<td>14085.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP growth</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflation (CPI)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic indicators</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign direct investment</td>
<td>% of GDP</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export growth</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>-10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Import growth</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current account balance</td>
<td>$ M</td>
<td>695.6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public debt</td>
<td>% of GDP</td>
<td>108.3</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External debt</td>
<td>$ M</td>
<td>6258.3</td>
<td>2406.1</td>
<td>3451.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total debt service</td>
<td>$ M</td>
<td>112.4</td>
<td>141.2</td>
<td>302.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash surplus or deficit</td>
<td>% of GDP</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax revenue</td>
<td>% of GDP</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government consumption</td>
<td>% of GDP</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public expnd. on education</td>
<td>% of GDP</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public expnd. on health</td>
<td>% of GDP</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R&amp;D expenditure</td>
<td>% of GDP</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military expenditure</td>
<td>% of GDP</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources (as of October 2015): The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2015 | International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook, October 2015 | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Military Expenditure Database 2015.
7 | Organization of the Market and Competition

The government is moving from a state-run economy to a more market-oriented system, but progress remains slow; the country continues to be plagued by corruption, deficiencies in the rule of law and by state-owned enterprises (SOEs) that are used to buttress the regime rather than generate sustained economic growth. Although the regime has been forced to pursue economic policies in line with IMF and World Bank conditions, the Republic of the Congo was still struggling among the worst performing countries in 2013 and 2014 as regards economic liberalization. In the 2014 Index of Economic Freedom (published by the Heritage Foundation) the country ranked only 169th out of 178 classified countries, while in the most recent (2015, published in 2014) Doing Business Index by the World Bank, it ranked 178th out of 189 classified countries, just slightly better than two years before.

Despite the government’s stated commitment to pursuing market-oriented policies, including the privatization or restructure of some major SOEs, the Republic of the Congo still has a long way to go before it will have a fully functioning, competitive market economy. In particular, the IMF has urged the Republic of the Congo “to bring the internal controls and accounting system of the state-owned oil company (Société Nationale des Pétroles du Congo, SNPC) up to internationally recognized standards; prevent conflicts of interests in the marketing of oil; require SNPC officials to publicly declare and divest any interests in companies having a business relationship with SNPC; and implement an anti-corruption action plan with international support.” Progress in the direction demanded by the IMF has been very slow (even suffering persistent setbacks) in the period under review. Indeed, the SNPC and related downstream sectors remain dominated by Sassou Nguesso’s family members.

There is no information regarding anti-cartel legislation. However, there is clear evidence that state monopolies operate in “strategic” sectors of the economy, including that of oil. In what is sometimes a cat-and-mouse game, the Sassou Nguesso regime tries to defend state monopolies against external pressure, largely from the IMF and World Bank, to liberalize and deregulate the economy. Increased Chinese economic intervention reduces the regime’s incentives to embrace market-oriented reforms.

The Republic of the Congo is integrated highly selectively into the global economy, primarily through the export of oil and the import of capital goods on which the viability of the oil sector depends. Other major aspects of world market integration are the import of (partly luxury) consumer goods demanded by the Congolese elite and the import of food, which is a consequence of the long-term neglect of domestic agriculture, resulting in insufficient domestic food production. While the major
export and import sectors are intertwined with respective global markets, most of the sectors of the Congolese economy are scarcely interconnected, if at all.

As a country that is heavily dependent upon the world market economy, the Republic of the Congo became a member of GATT in 1963 and then joined the WTO in 1997. It also became a party to other international trade treaties, including Central African cooperation regimes.

As a member of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), the Congo applies CEMAC’s customs rules. The average tariff rate is 14.7%.

Under IMF pressure, the government has committed itself to the liberalization of its economy. Yet to a large extent the foreign trade regime remains under the control of the state and its actors. The most significant drawbacks include import and export quotas, restrictive import licensing rules, non-tariff barriers, bureaucracy, government export-promotion programs, an inefficient customs service and a lack of transparency.

More recently, the government started reforms to improve trade and customs procedures, including computerization of data. However, corruption remains a major factor capable of thwarting all attempts to bring forth transparency. With the IMF’s decision to provide debt relief as part of the HIPC initiative in 2010, Western creditors now enjoy less leverage than ever before, while progress towards trade liberalization has slowed markedly.

The financial sector and the banking system have been largely privatized, though Sassou Nguesso retains controlling interests in some of them. Major banks, including Crédit du Congo and La Congolaise de Banques, are now in foreign private hands, mostly from France and Morocco. BGFI Bank Congo, however, is almost entirely controlled by the Sassou Nguesso family. Although the number of banks operating in the country has grown in recent years, the financial sector remains tiny – confined to a small number of customers (companies and individuals) – while the majority of the population does not or only marginally participates in it. Indeed, the banking system is generally overcapitalized, since much of the population lacks the collateral required for major loans.

Owing to the monitoring system of the Central African Banking Commission (COBAC), the country’s financial sector has become less vulnerable to shocks originating from domestic economic problems or international financial and economic crises. However, the banking system is still structurally weak, and there is no functioning capital market. A micro-finance sector, which aims to support small-scale projects, especially in rural areas, is being developed very slowly and primarily by religious charities operating in Brazzaville. Given the country’s significant oil reserves, Western creditors have chosen to allocate their development aid to other African countries, with the result that the domestic micro-finance sector lags behind other countries in the region.
8 | Currency and Price Stability

As a member of the Central African Economic and Monetary Union (Communauté économique et monétaire de l’Afrique centrale, CEMAC), the Republic of the Congo uses the CFA franc, which is pegged to the euro. Thus, the stability of the currency is to a large extent influenced by decision-making in the euro zone. Another important factor is the monetary policy of the Bank of Central African States (Banque des Etats de l’Afrique centrale, BEAC), the central bank of the CEMAC countries, which is located in Yaoundé, Cameroon. According to the IMF, BEAC policy aims to maintain price stability and strengthen the external position of CEMAC members. There is no clearly defined national policy regarding price stability and foreign exchange. The IMF is putting pressure on the Brazzaville government to subordinate its policies to IMF rules. When IMF pressure lessens, the government tends to stray from the path.

The country’s average annual rate of inflation scored 3.9% between 2012 and 2014. From 2010, with the global economy rebounding after the 2008-2009 crisis, the Republic of the Congo started to face high risks of inflationary pressure, fueled by high oil prices, rising export income and enhanced government revenue. High oil revenue encouraged the government to loosen the tight fiscal policies prescribed by the IMF. Thus, the inflation rate surged to 5% in 2012 and 4.6% in 2013 (from 1.8% in 2011). In 2014, the rate has been projected at 2.2% by the IMF.

Given the country’s dependency on food imports, inflationary pressures can also be attributed to soaring international food prices, which has been felt mostly in the period preceding 2009 and once again from 2010 onwards. Food subsidies are politically motivated, as the government attempts to reduce food costs to placate the urban population.

Following the mass deportations of DRC nationals in early summer 2014 and the accompanying border closures, food prices in local Brazzaville markets increased by as much as 500%, as did the costs of manual labor. These primarily affected the urban poor, however, rather than the political elite.

Macrostability is highly vulnerable to challenges of any kind caused by national or international developments in the oil sector. This has been underlined equally by the different oil booms of the 2000s as well as the ensuing downturns, which could be witnessed in 2009 and again in 2014. In 2014, the government was forced to drastically curtail its planned infrastructure allocations due to revenue shortfalls. Accordingly, Congo’s macroeconomic position remains erratic. The government tends to oscillate between tight, IMF-style fiscal policies and less IMF-prone policies, depending on the level of oil revenue. At times of high revenue, the government tends to stray from the IMF path, while in less favorable situations, it may ask the IMF for support. Thus, the government’s fiscal and debt policies are inconsistent and insufficient to promote macroeconomic stability.
9 | Private Property

The Sassou Nguesso government has resisted privatizing key business assets. Moreover, the major domestic interests in key economic sectors, including oil, timber, aviation, hotels, and shipping, are dominated by the Sassou Nguesso family and longtime allies. Accordingly, state-owned and affiliated enterprises have a disproportionate influence on economic performance and business conditions in key sectors. State influence, bureaucracy and corruption are significant impediments to the protection of property rights. Starting, running and sustaining a business is expensive and dependent upon regulations that are not sufficiently transparent.

One of the major impediments has been the complexity of the tax system. However, from 2010 the government took steps to simplify this system. While income tax has flexible rates between 1% and 45%, corporate tax has been fixed at 34% and value added tax at 18%.

The EIU has mentioned “security risks to business in Congo” resulting from “the lack in clarity of regulation, and slow and poorly functioning government institutions on which investors may depend for routine matters.” The EIU has also complained that the “security of contracts and the enforcement of justice cannot be guaranteed through the slow-moving justice system.” The country’s overburdened and insufficiently funded judicial system offers limited protection for business and property rights.

However, there have been no recent reports of state expropriation of major private assets.

State-owned enterprises (SOEs) play a key role in sectors perceived as “strategic,” such as oil, transport, telecommunication, water and electricity. Public investment is also present in sectors like farming, forestry, banking and tourism (hotels). Given the powerful position of SOEs as well as public investment in mixed companies (i.e. joint ventures) in the form of majority or minority shares, the economic and political leverage of genuine private enterprises remains fairly weak. Private companies may register and subsequently vie freely and sometimes successfully for private or public contracts, but they very often encounter economic and administrative constraints, caused, for instance, by a lack of credit availability or bureaucratic obstacles.

The government is under strong pressure to improve the investment climate for private, and especially foreign, capital. Bowing to the IMF and the World Bank, the government has declared its official commitment to encouraging private-sector investment and to allowing the privatization of SOEs. With the country’s external debt to the Paris Club now forgiven, however, international creditors generally lack sufficient leverage to compel meaningful economic reforms. There are several major obstacles to privatization, including vested interests within the state elite that wish to
retain public ownership, a lack of political will to ensure the smooth privatization of state companies, and areas of political instability and corruption that act as disincentives to private investment. On average, it takes over 150 days to incorporate a company, while the cost of completing licensing requirements is very high. The very poor performance of the government regarding private sector issues has been reflected in the country’s poor performance in the World Bank’s Doing Business Index.

10 | Welfare Regime

In the Republic of the Congo, most people are forced to rely on family and community structures as the social basis of survival. Subsistence agriculture and the informal sector shape the living conditions of a large majority of the population. For the relatively few employees in the formal economy, a basic social security system has been established that provides for insurance in cases of accident, illness, disability, old age and death, as well as maternity and family allowances. Moreover, a legal minimum wage is in place. Retired high-level civil servants and state employees are supported by the Caisse de Retraite des Fonctionnaires (CRF), whereas the Caisse Nationale de Sécurité Sociale (CNSS) is responsible for other beneficiaries. Despite some increases in payments, made possible by the oil booms of the 2000s, the amounts available for most beneficiaries remain generally low, and the vast majority of public sector employees engage in corruption to supplement their incomes and ensure their post-retirement welfare. With international assistance, special programs have been created for demobilized civil-war combatants in order to encourage their reintegration into civilian life. These programs, however, have been governed by Sassou Nguesso political allies – Michel Ngakala, most notably – who have generally embezzled foreign funding at the expense of reintegration programs.

Equal opportunity does not exist. In particular, there are strong biases in terms of ethnicity and gender. There are institutions tasked with compensating for gross social differences, but they are limited in scope and quality. Discrimination against women is ubiquitous in most sectors of the economic, social and political systems, while access to – and exclusion from – opportunities is highly dependent on the ethnic origin of the individuals involved. Discrimination also limits access to secondary and tertiary education as well as to public office.

With the rise of female ministers in successive Sassou Nguesso governments, regional discrimination is perhaps now more salient, with high level ministerial, parastatal, and military posts reserved exclusively for Cuvette regionals and other northerners. This persistent ethnic discrimination led to the central cleavage in the 1997 civil war and could threaten the country’s political stability as the 2016 presidential election approaches.
11 | Economic Performance

Supported by high levels of international demand and prices of oil – the country’s major source of income – the economy has been able to recover gradually from the wartime crises of the late 1990s and early 2000s. The recovery was also assisted by massive external debt relief (particularly in 2010) and international donor commitments. However, as the oil booms faded in 2009 (temporarily) and 2014 (with no foreseeable recovery), the process was far from sustainable, with erratic developments in some macroeconomic data. In the review period, the economy grew by 3.8% in 2012 and 3.3% in 2013, while growth has been projected by the IMF at 6% for 2014. Overall inflation averaged 3.9% in the three-year period. Oil production was estimated at 268,000 barrels/day (b/d) in 2012 and 241,000 b/d in 2013, while it has been projected at 244,000 b/d in 2014. The oil sector alone contributed 65%, 58% and 55% of GDP in 2012, 2013 and 2014, respectively. Growth rates of the oil sector were negative, with -9.7% and -10.2% in 2012 and 2013. Only in 2014, a very small positive growth rate of 1% has been projected. However, given the unexpectedly rough downturn of oil prices (and faltering global demand), 2014 growth projections may prove to be too optimistic.

The bleak trend in oil sector data has been cushioned by the growth of non-oil sectors like construction, transport and telecom. The non-oil economy (only 35% to 45% of GDP in the 2012-2014 period) prospered by 9.7% in 2012, 8.1% in 2013 and a projected 7.5% in 2014. According to (massively readjusted) IMF data, per-capita GDP (PPP) rose to $6,074 in 2012, $6,232 in 2013 and a projected $6,572 in 2014, (the benefit of which went mainly to the oil companies and the state elites.

The current account produced deficits in the three-year period: -1.2%, -3.4% and a projected -3.2% of GDP, respectively. Government revenue amounted to 42.6% of GDP in 2012, 46.9% in 2013 and a projected 46.6% in 2014. Government expenditure rose from 36.2% of GDP in 2012 to 38.4% in 2013, while it further jumped to a projected 41.4% of GDP in 2014. The investment rate represented 26%, 30.9% and a projected 36.5% of GDP, respectively. After substantial relief granted by international creditors in 2010, government debt sprouted again from a low 22.9% of GDP in 2010 to 34.1% in 2012 and to 38.2% in both 2013 and 2014. This borrowing has been used to fund major infrastructure projects, including the Special Economic Zone initiative, which are generally viewed as inefficient by IMF and World Bank economists.

Notwithstanding, economic trends remain generally erratic and fragile, depending largely on oil revenue and the level of national oil production. Although the subsistence subsector of agriculture is an important part of the economy in terms of employment and food provision, agriculture in general is also a sector traditionally neglected by governments and their developmental policies. Thus, the Republic of
the Congo remains heavily dependent on food imports (about one-fifth of total imports) to meet the needs of the urban – and increasingly urbanizing – population. Moreover, the industrial sector outside the oil industry remains fairly weak, and the tertiary sector does not form a pillar of the economy strong enough to compensate for losses caused by an occasional downturn in the oil industry. Although there is no reliable unemployment data, a majority of the population still lives on less than $2 per day. The country, as its Gini coefficient attests, is among the most unequal in the world.

12 | Sustainability

Tropical rainforests still cover more than half the territory of the Republic of the Congo. However, wood is harvested on a commercial scale and, after oil, it is the second most important source of foreign exchange income. Deforestation, soil erosion and the pollution of the air, soil and water are the Republic of the Congo’s primary environmental concerns. The country is also slightly affected by the local and subregional consequences of global warming, which sometimes means less rainfall than is usually expected or, at other times, heavy rains and flooding. According to UN data, 109 species were threatened with extinction as of 2013. A special sphere of environmental concern is the oil-producing region in the vicinity of Pointe-Noire, which brings high risks of pollution to the air, soil and water. Ecological aspects of sustainability remain secondary in the formulation of economic policy; foresting licenses are often dispensed with little or no consideration of environmental impact. Political factors are more relevant concerns for the Sassou Nguesso government. Since its primary constituency is located in the north, Sassou Nguesso’s government requires foreign timber companies to invest in social projects – health clinics, schools, and roads – only in northern communities. Hence, the timber sector is stratified, with European firms – bound by EU investment agreements, which require public investment – licensed to operate in the north, and East Asian timber firms more active in the south.

However, the Brazzaville government has chosen to participate in international – and, especially, central African – agreements on protecting tropical rainforests. Many observers, however, believe this participation is motivated by political concerns, and has not affected its domestic environmental policies.

In 2014, the Republic of the Congo ranked 130th out of 178 states assessed by the Environmental Performance Index (EPI 39.44).
There are only basic levels of institutions for education, training and R&D. Education and training facilities are mostly concentrated in the large cities of Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire, while most of the country does not have sufficient education institutions. While the education sector was significantly damaged during the civil war, the government has worked hard to rehabilitate it with international assistance. In 2010, education expenditures amounted to 6.2% of GDP. Gross enrollment rates at schools, which had plunged to meager levels in the late 1990s, recovered substantially. In 2012, the gross enrollment rate was 109% (girls 113%) for primary schools, 54% (girls 50%) for secondary schools, 14% (girls 14%) for pre-primary schools and 10% (women 8%) in tertiary education. However, the quality of institutions, staff, curricula and material is weak. In 2013 and 2014, several major teachers’ unions protested the government’s persistent refusal to adequately fund the education sector. In retaliation, the government incarcerated union leaders without trial for several weeks, which elicited a series of criticisms from Amnesty International and several other human rights organizations.

Research and development efforts are nascent at best. Shortcomings in the education and technology sectors form a huge obstacle to the country’s economic and social development.

Educational curricula, particularly at the university level, are subordinated to political interests. There is virtually no political or accounting instruction at either of the country’s universities, both dominated by the government.
Transformation Management

I. Level of Difficulty

Prior to debt relief in 2010, years of economic mismanagement – including by Sassou Nguesso himself between 1979 and 1992 – left the country with considerable external debt, which somewhat constrained its ability to implement economic policies that would generate broad-based growth. These constraints were lessened, in part, by loans from international creditors, particularly when Sassou Nguesso reclaimed power following the 1997 civil war. These loans sought to encourage the Sassou Nguesso government to diversify its economy. Since attaining HIPC status, the constraints imposed by Congo’s external debt have been eliminated. Accordingly, the government has enjoyed a wide range of latitude in its economic and social policies, which was only amplified by high global oil prices, at least until they declined in 2014. As a result of the government’s failure to invest oil revenues in viable economic diversification projects – along with its failure to create a domestic business climate that attracts foreign investors – Congo remains highly subject to volatility in global oil prices.

Domestically, Congo’s economic prospects remain uncertain, as a range of major ills persist: mass poverty, ethnic, regional and social conflicts, the weakness of civil society, poor education, a deficient infrastructure and the lack of economic diversification (including the generation of foreign exchange). However, it should be stressed that these domestic constraints are used by the Sassou Nguesso regime to buttress its political position; a crushingly poor southern population is less able to contest northern political dominance, just as northerners, who fear southern political ascension, are more likely to support the Sassou Nguesso regime, unpalatable though it may be.

In the economic sphere, unforeseeable crisis-prone developments may impose severe limitations on governance. Such developments may include the ups and downs of world market prices of the major export (oil) and imports (food, energy, capital goods) as well as the cost of external debt (mainly interest). External imponderabilities are associated with conflict-ridden countries in the neighboring region, namely the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic, with the potential of conflicts spilling over to parts of the Republic of the Congo (e.g., as a result of refugee flows).
There is a range of civil society organizations in the Republic of the Congo. Dozens of them are engaged under the umbrella of the Programme Concerté Pluri-Acteurs Congo (PCPA Congo), together with Congolese state actors as well as French NGOs and ministries. Among other issues, the PCPA Congo is focusing on human rights, peace-building and poverty alleviation. However, many civil society organizations have a very limited scope and profile, largely confined to special issues of a low political profile (e.g., forests). Civil society organizations blossomed in the early 1990s, as the country transitioned from a Marxist dictatorship to a multiparty democracy; since returning to power in 1997, the Sassou Nguesso regime has sought to weaken civil society organizations, the better to consolidate its authority. The regime does not allow organizations to perform that are openly opposed to it in their programs and attitudes. Since civil society organizations have to be cautious in their actions, most of them are dedicated to modest reform, at best. These organizations are careful to articulate their positions in the least threatening manner possible, since criticism of the regime could result in a political backlash. As a rule, civil society organizations and NGOs avoid political statements that may provoke an unpleasant reaction from the state; instead, they pursue low-profile political issues in order to protect their specialized fields of activity from state interference.

If it comes to political influence in areas of major interest, the government does not allow criticism-prone civil society actors to participate. Notwithstanding, some courageous civil society activists have not been reluctant to criticize the regime’s human rights record and oil revenue management. The Observatoire congolais des droits de l’Homme (OCDH) and Transparency International have been particularly active here. Since both are relatively visible internationally, the Sassou Nguesso regime counters them by setting up sham organizations, which work to discredit the legitimate civil society organizations and advocate on the government’s behalf. The government-sponsored Human Rights Commission (HRC), whose members have also been appointed by the government, is widely regarded as ineffective; FECODHO is an ostensibly independent human rights organization that, in reality, is funded by the Sassou Nguesso regime and consistently defends its worst abuses.

Many civil society organizations have an ethnic or ethno-regional basis. Village-level associations are historically very strong in the country, even though they now have virtually no political leverage beyond the local level.

Ethnic, regional and social conflicts, including mass poverty, all contributed to the political turbulence and civil wars in the 1990s and early 2000s. The Republic of the Congo is driven by strong ethnic, regional and social divisions that are also reflected in political parties, mainly the ruling PCT, the co-opted, but potentially opposition MCDDI and the (not co-opted) opposition UPADS. While there has been little violence since the end of the civil war (including during the review period), the ethnic, regional and social rifts in the country may seriously endanger political processes, as well as social and economic development, in the years to come.
Congolese society remains torn by conflicts that are boiling under the surface in an only superficially pacified country. These conflicts, moreover, could turn violent as the presidential elections of 2016 approach. For instance, the potential of violence was highlighted in 2013 when security forces clashed with the bodyguard of dissident military officer Marcel Ntsourou in Brazzaville. The 2012 explosion catastrophe may also give a hint in that direction (as it might have been part of an attempted coup by Ntsourou and his men).

In 2014, as it began preparing for a constitutional revision, the Sassou Nguesso government stoked resentment against foreigners – primarily in Brazzaville – to curry popular support for the regime. The targets of the government’s media campaign were primarily DRC nationals, accused of responsibility for petty crime in Brazzaville, and West African traders in Brazzaville markets, who are overwhelmingly of West African descent. In June, several hundred thousand DRC nationals were expelled from the country and the borders between the two countries closed. Amidst growing anti-Islam sentiment among the region’s Christians – due largely to the conflict in the neighboring CAR – government-owned media repeatedly accused the West African traders, almost all of whom are also Muslim, of price gouging, stimulating several instances of religiously motivated petty crime against West African businesses.

II. Management Performance

14 | Steering Capability

In order to overcome the problems posed by its recent violent past, the government must improve its governance and tackle corruption. Although the present government is aware of the scope of the problems it faces and possesses the management capabilities to overcome them, its policy priorities are currently inconsistent with sustainable development.

Given its large majority at the national parliamentary level, the political leadership is able to organize its policy agenda without worrying about political competition. The IMF, World Bank and donor pressure influence policy formation. However, the government is almost entirely preoccupied with sustaining its own power and maintaining the ruling coalition. Although it is occasionally able to articulate long-term developmental plans, most projects – such as the new international airport outside Oyo – serve only the interests of the ruling elite and are of doubtful economic relevance. A severe shortage of qualified professionals also adversely affects institutional capacity and effectiveness in outlying administrative districts. The
leadership is officially committed to building democracy and a market economy, but its strategic aims are not commensurate with the country’s situation, problems and needs. The government does not formulate security, political, social, economic and environmental policies consistently enough to articulate clearly identifiable objectives and strategic priorities. Even if policies convey the impression of being in line with such objectives and priorities, the government does not really intend to follow or implement them. Sooner or later, policies are corrupted by the vested interests of parts of the state elite. Economic diversification and political decentralization, for instance, are both desirable objectives. Both objectives were subsequently adopted as valuable objectives by the government. Although the government is able to formulate such objectives and priorities, the realities of policy implementation are different. Economic diversification, for example, is far from coming to the surface, given the fact that the oil sector is still dominant. In the political sphere, administrative decentralization has not resulted in any real transfers of powers and competencies from the state to regional and local authorities. Although the constitution calls for a decentralized state, it effectively remains a highly centralized state.

Ultimately, the Sassou Nguesso regime claims commitment to economic diversification and political decentralization – as well as other political reforms – but there is reasonable doubt as to whether the regime has an interest in implementing these reforms.

The political leadership accepts the goals of both a constitutional democracy and a socially responsible and ecologically sustainable market economy, according to official statements. Moreover, the government is principally able to implement its policies effectively; it faces virtually no domestic opposition. The government, however, chooses not to implement the decentralization and diversification policies to which it claims commitment because it has little incentive to do so.

As a result, the government tends to execute policies derived from these insights only when pressured by the IMF, the World Bank or other international actors.

Diversification of the economy, which is urgently needed, remains an official goal of economic policy. While the implementation of this policy is impeded by vested interests within the state elite, a slight tendency toward diversification can be observed in recent years. For instance, in recent years the share of exports from the oil sector declined from over 90% to little more than 80%. This tendency was relevant even in the 2010-2014 period, when high global oil prices translated to exceptionally high revenue for the Congolese state. Notwithstanding, many of the initiatives ostensibly designed to diversify the economy are indeed driven by the regime’s political interests, a fact that undermines the confidence of the foreign investors the government hopes to attract.
The political leadership does respond to mistakes and failed policies but its interest is in its own survival and prosperity; it has little interest in generating sustainable growth and participation for the broader population. To this end, the regime actively learns from previous successes and failures. Regarding economic and political transformation goals, however, it reacts with meaningful adjustments only under external pressure from the IMF, the World Bank or other actors. Failed policies are corrected under this pressure rather than by the insight of the Congolese political leadership. However, as a result of the external debt relief in 2010 and the oil boom of the 2011-2014 period, the government felt less pressure from international creditors to liberalize than at any point in the last three decades. Accordingly, many development projects serve the narrow interests of the elite rather than the economic interests of the rural and urban poor. So far, there is no sustainable attitude of the state elite toward the needs of economic, social and political development, which can lead the country into a better future without external impetus. However, the leverage of external actors may increase again as a consequence of the dwindling oil revenue garnered by the Congolese state as a result of the drop in international oil prices since mid-2014.

15 | Resource Efficiency

Due to the power of vested interests, the government uses only some of its available oil resources efficiently. To some extent, government officials and their entourages consume state resources themselves, although the precise extent of this embezzlement is unknown, since the government refuses to release oil revenue data. For example, as a result of clientelism, the cabinet comprises over 35 ministers; indeed, the 2002 constitution created a senate essentially appointed by local governments, another source of patronage. Furthermore, the bureaucracy suffers from a lack of skills and professionalism since it is, to a large extent, shaped by ethnic and regional clientelism rather than by merit.

Although the government has occasionally used windfall oil profits to reduce domestic and foreign debt, its primary objective was to persuade the IMF and World Bank to simply forgive the government’s debt burden. Once granted, debt forgiveness severely undercut the IMF’s and World Bank’s leverage to force the regime to improve the use of available human, financial and organizational resources. For example, once distanced from oil revenue management, the president’s son, Denis Christel, is again in a central position with the state oil company.
Although the ruling coalition’s interests are remarkably homogeneous, it is hard to speak of policy coordination in terms of the normative framework of the BTI, even if limited to technocratic efficiency (and not democracy). Different parts of the government compete against each other; these competitions are encouraged by President Sassou Nguesso himself, since elite competition for his favor fosters compliance with his interests. Moreover, vested personal and corporate interests remain opposed to the government’s alleged goals of economic diversification and decreased reliance on the oil sector. Many public works projects provide high-value consumption goods to the elite; their construction contracts are allocated to firms owned by members of the governing coalition. Rather than pursue sound long-term economic policies designed to lift large numbers of its citizens out of poverty, the government generally prefers to enrich its constituent members. Slight improvements can only be observed as a result of external pressure by the IMF and the World Bank. These organizations try hard to direct the government to a more consistent and sustainable policy approach, but they currently possess very little leverage. Indeed, discouraged by the government’s policy priorities following debt relief in 2010, in 2012 the IMF virtually closed its Brazzaville office, folding responsibility for Congo into the Kinshasa portfolio.

The Republic of the Congo takes part in the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM); in February 2013, the country was rated as being compliant with the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). Under external (IMF, World Bank) pressure, the government has committed itself – rhetorically, at least – to combating corruption and to implementing mechanisms of good governance. Under the pressure of vested interests in the state apparatus and as a constituent of the problem, the government is unwilling to wipe out corruption. The IMF has given some political credit to the government for taking a few steps toward reforming the state oil company, privatizing a troubled bank (COFIPA) and reintegrating the country into the Kimberley Process (which concerns separating the sourcing of diamonds from conflict) to which the Republic of the Congo was officially readmitted in 2007. Moreover, Jean-Jacques Bouya, a confidant of President Sassou Nguesso, who had been able to execute projects (“grands travaux”) to the benefit of vested interests in the state elite for years outside government, parliamentary or juridical control, has been integrated into the government in September 2012 to improve the country’s image of transparency (as Minister at the Presidency for Spatial Planning and the General Delegation for Major Projects). Officially, at least, he has finally become accountable to the parliament. But given that the parliament is largely controlled by the president’s party, the PCT, the quality of such control remains questionable at the very least.

In sum, there are some slight improvements in terms of anti-corruption performance, which to a large extent remain cosmetic, given the dominance of the president, his party and his confidants, who are entangled in the system of corruption nurtured by
the country’s main resource, oil. However, the prevalent impression is shaped by a generally unsatisfactory performance regarding governance, transparency and corruption.

16 | Consensus-Building

In the rhetoric of the regime, democracy is a major political objective and major political concern of the political elite of the country. As such, on a superficial level at least, this objective is shared by a large part of Congolese society. It is, however, highly doubtful whether the government and the political forces backing it are really committed to democracy given the authoritarian style of the regime. Sassou Nguesso himself, alongside strong factions in the PCT, acted as major advocates of one-party rule from the 1970s through to the 1990s. If they are now presenting themselves as advocates of democracy, this is due to the fact that they created a multiparty system, the plurality of which is largely shaped by a set of PCT satellite parties while genuine opposition remains too weak to present a significant challenge to the regime. The official commitment to democracy is also due to the dominant international political climate and the need to gain the support of donors rather than to an actual change of mind. The real advocates of democracy are more likely to be found in the weak opposition parties and in civil society. Despite a referendum and a state-orchestrated “national dialogue,” the government unilaterally imposed the new constitutional order rather than negotiating it multilaterally. In essence, substantial consensus-building has not taken place.

In the perception of the regime, a market economy as such does not play a major role as a political objective. Although the government accepted IMF-style market economy policies, it did so only under heavy external pressure. Given the facts that the power of these policies lies largely in the hands of the state and the state is based on an economy that is able to create revenue for the state elite, the state elite are strongly inclined to favor the state capitalism and state intervention that have dominated the economic system under one-party rule from the 1970s through to the 1990s. If the government is now presenting itself as compliant with IMF demands for market economy policies, this is again due to the need to gain the support of donors rather than to an actual change of mind. In years of high oil revenue (as in the 2010-2013 period), the government felt strong enough to depart from full-scale IMF conditionality which is equivalent to strict economic liberalism. The true advocates of a market economy are more likely to be found in the weak opposition parties and in civil society. However, their political priorities have been of little political relevance since Lissouba and the UPADS were overthrown in 1997.
Given the authoritarian and repressive approach of the government, it is doubtful whether economic and political reform is actually part of its agenda. There are scant signs that the government is promoting economic and political reform. In the absence of external pressure, the government would be unlikely to adopt any measures of reform. In this sense, the government itself may be considered a major anti-reform veto actor. Reformers who deserve to be called such possess insufficient leverage in the country.

In general, the political forces supporting the government of Sassou Nguesso and the PCT appear to be able – at will – to exclude, either politically or by force, any reform-minded individuals not ready to cooperate with the government. The bloody clash of government forces with the bodyguard of the dissident colonel, Marcel Ntsourou, in December 2013 exemplifies this determination. Powerful veto actors have been defeated both through divisive political maneuvers, including incentives for co-option, and through the use of force, which has included massive human rights violations.

The Sassou Nguesso regime tends to exploit (ethnic, regional, social and political) cleavages to its own advantage using a carrot-and-stick approach, rewarding political forces that are ready to cooperate and punishing those political forces that opt for the opposition. While co-opting cooperation-prone elements, the regime also tends to instrumentalize political rivalries to its benefit. In doing so, the government exacerbates cleavages between rival political forces, political parties and between individual politicians.

Apart from smaller players, there are three major political power centers in the country. The most powerful of them is the Sassou Nguesso regime, including the political elite, the PCT and the majority of the country’s military officers. Most of them have their roots in the Mbochi ethnic group of the central-northern part of the country. The second player is the main opposition party, the Union Panafricaine pour la Démocratie Sociale (UPADS), founded by five-year (1992 – 1997) Congolese President Pascal Lissouba (pardoned after nearly 15 years in exile). The UPADS is primarily backed by the southern regions of Niari, Bouenza and Lekoumou. The third power center is the capital Brazzaville and the surrounding Pool region in the extreme south, with the clan of late Bernard Kolélas and the Mouvement Congolais pour la Démocratie et le Développement Intégral (MCDDI) as major stakeholder. The MCDDI fluctuates between co-option and opposition, with three party members, including a son of Kolélas, Guy Brice Parfait, acting as members of the government from September 2012 until at least late 2014. The party has its strongholds in the Bacongo population, especially the Lari subgroup, in Brazzaville and the Pool region. The militia of “Pasteur Ntoumi” that gave up its arms in 2008 after years of violent conflict was also rooted in the Pool region.
The 1990s and the early 2000s witnessed a lot of political and/or violent confrontation between Sassou Nguesso forces and the other actors mentioned. This recent history of the Republic of the Congo clearly demonstrates that the country’s conflicting political forces have not been able to manage political cleavages in a peaceful manner. Although the government has worked hard to integrate as many political and military forces as possible into the new system created in 2002, major ethnic, regional, social and political cleavages remain. The regime tried to impose “solutions” on its opponents according to its own needs, as defined by the regime. Political positions of the opponents are largely left aside. Thus, there is still the potential in Congolese society for the eruption of violence, as was the case in 2013 when government forces clashed with the bodyguard of renegade colonel Marcel Ntsourou. Given the lack of deeper (and honest) processes of reconciliation and reintegration, the risk of renewed violent conflict cannot be ruled out. The government exacerbates the potential for conflict by limiting high level political, economic, and military positions to northerners, and especially Cuvette regionals.

In 2014, the government fomented two more social cleavages for its own benefit. Between April and July, the government exported several hundred thousand DRC nationals, often violently and despite UN protests. The political opposition believes the deportations were intended to display the government’s willingness to employ force in pursuit of its political objectives, particularly as the possibility of a constitutional revision looms. Later, as domestic food prices rose after the border with DRC was closed, government media accused Brazzaville’s West African traders of price gouging. This created the specter of religious violence for the first time in the country’s history.

In general, owing to its indisputable military strength and political supremacy, the political leadership makes little effort to involve diverse civil society organizations in policymaking, although in the rhetoric of the regime civil society actors are invited to participate. If it comes to political influence in areas of major interest, the government tends to exclude politically opposed civil society actors from participating (such as in consultations over electoral policy and oil transparency). When civil society actors attempt to register their frustration with corruption, their efforts are met sometimes with simulated appreciation, sometimes with attempts at political diversion and sometimes with repression. The regime has diversified and readjusted its tactics, using a carrot-and-stick approach that cannot easily be decoded by civil society actors. In recent years, the regime has to some extent shifted from violence to political tactics when dealing with the civil society, particularly as it has sought to attain debt relief from the IMF and World Bank. In 2014, however, with debt forgiven and a constitutional revision looming, the government reversed course and expelled two prominent journalists while suspending publication of several independent newspapers.
Different from other war-torn countries, the Republic of the Congo did not create a truth and reconciliation commission to cope with the sociopolitical and moral consequences of violent conflict. The government refrained from introducing institutions and mechanisms which would provide opportunities for open, equitable and sustainable settlements. Rather it tended to impose dialogues and settlements from above, which meant that real reconciliation could not take place. Moreover, the Sassou Nguesso regime occasionally exploits memories of the violence of the late 1990s and early 2000s to secure popular acquiescence. Given a lack of reconciliation, societal conflicts could turn violent again in the potential cases of economic, social and political crisis, such as the violent Ntoumou affair in 2013.

In his conflict with the regime, Ntoumou brought to mind a highly criminal human rights violation that shook the country for several years during and after 1999: the “Disparus du Beach” affair. Close to 400 young men, all returned refugees, “disappeared” shortly after their repatriation on the banks of the Congo River in May 1999. In 2005, litigation ended in a settlement that cleared the state of any juridical responsibility while the government committed to paying financial indemnities to the families of the “Disparus.” Ntoumou himself was charged in court but acquitted of any guilt regarding the disappearance of the young men. While their actual fate was concealed by the state authorities for years, Ntoumou maintained in interviews in 2013 that the regime and even president Sassou Nguesso himself had ordered the murder of the “Disparus.” The reaction of the regime – a bloody gun battle with the bodyguard of Ntoumou, the arrest of Ntoumou in December 2013 and Ntoumou’s life sentence of forced labor in September 2014 – demonstrated both the highly repressive attitude of the regime and the (genuine or imagined) political toxicity of the “Disparus du Beach” affair. This also revealed that the Sassou Nguesso regime had failed to organize any credible and sustainable reconciliation within the country. Rather, the regime sought to corrupt the memory of past injustice in order to strengthen the ideological substructure of its power.

So far, reconciliation between victims and perpetrators of past injustices remains a question that has not been sufficiently resolved. The political leadership and the government have been less involved in this than the churches and other religious and cultural actors. Religious leaders are a respected non-partisan voice in the country. They were already associated with the campaigns for democracy in the early 1990s, and they stressed the importance of national reconciliation as the foundation for sustainable peace. Governmental approaches to reconciliation and dialogue, which began as early as 1998, have had doubtful success as they have been imposed from above. Radical forces like the politico-military movement of Pasteur Ntoumou have had to accept the peacemaking conditions set by the government if they want to participate. In 2005, the late former Prime Minister Bernard Kolélas was granted amnesty from a death sentence in 2005 when he declared his readiness to work for peace within the government’s political framework. Former President Pascal
Lissouba was also granted amnesty from a 30-year sentence in 2009, but spends little time in the country.

17 | International Cooperation

Since 2002, dependent upon its willingness to approach the IMF for cooperation, the Sassou Nguesso regime has been able to persuade international donors to commit themselves to substantial development aid contributions, with the bulk of aid coming from France, Germany, other European countries, European Union institutions, the World Bank, the U.S. and China since 2010. (Notwithstanding, a substantial part of the aid did not actually flow, but rather took the form of book entries following the comprehensive debt rescheduling agreement of 2010). Development aid, as well as other external technical and financial assistance, is crucial to the survival of the Republic of the Congo as an independent nation state and to the viability of the Brazzaville regime.

While the government pretends to use international assistance for purely developmental ends, it actually lacks the political will and the institutional capability to pursue a consistent long-term development strategy suitable to use the support effectively. While a credible development strategy would mean less dependency on oil, more economic diversification and more transparency, the regime has not abandoned its prior path of oil rent-seeking, which is prone to kleptocratic practices and corruption, while the non-oil economy, although growing, remains small and dominated by the Sassou Nguesso family and its longtime allies. The regime’s domination of these sectors simultaneously discourages foreign investors.

In general, the government tries to present itself as a credible and reliable partner in its relations with the international community. This is especially the case at the levels of the United Nations, the AU and other international organizations, with which the country can gain positive standing without much financial and political cost. Thanks to its image of reliability, the Republic of the Congo was chosen to become a nonpermanent member of the U.N. Security Council (for two years), and Sassou Nguesso was chosen to lead the African Union for one year (2006 – 2007). However, the picture is very mixed. Although the Sassou Nguesso regime has secured the confidence of Africa’s autocrats, it remains unable to gain the trust of the IMF, World Bank and most Western governments when the government’s commitment to economic and political reform is addressed (or put into question). In 2014, even as the Sassou Nguesso regime issued loans to several African autocrats and sought to broker a peace deal in CAR, the government’s decision to expel several hundred DRC nationals damaged its standing in the region.

Following its violent return to power in 1997 and as a consequence of the stigmatization of non-constitutional takeovers by major powers and international organizations, the Sassou Nguesso regime became somewhat isolated internationally;
however, the new government quickly secured strong French support and has since restored relationships with the European Union, the United Nations, the AU and subregional organizations. The Brazzaville government also worked hard to improve its relationship with the United States, especially during the presidency of Barack Obama, although Sassou Nguesso’s apparent intention to amend the constitution to permit himself a third presidential term renders these efforts essentially moot. On the other hand, China is an increasingly important partner to the Sassou Nguesso regime (both are interested in expanding Chinese stakes in the Congolese oil, forestry and mining sectors). Yet, throughout its entire history, the regime’s main Western sponsor has been France.

Although the World Bank, the European Union, the African Development Bank and U.N. organizations remain strategic partners, the country’s ascent to lower-middle-income status (fueled by oil revenue) and debt relief limit the political relevance of international donors. Following the years of civil war and political turbulence, the government has made strong efforts to reintegrate fully into the international community and to foster its image as a reliable and disciplined partner with democratic norms and stabilization-oriented macroeconomic policies, while using external support in line with the needs of reconstruction, development and poverty reduction. The country works closely with international donors. Most notably, President Sassou Nguesso increasingly styles himself as an elder statesman in Africa. Although the government works with bilateral and multilateral international donors (like the IMF and the World Bank), external pressure – particularly with debt relief – has had limited effect on government policy given the power of counteracting vested interests within the state elite. Corruption and a lack of transparency pose counterproductive factors.

In general, the political leadership cooperates with many neighboring states and complies with the rules set by regional and international organizations. However, relations with neighboring states have deteriorated somewhat in recent years. Although interactions with the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo had improved in recent years, the wave of mass, violent deportations in mid-2014 have poisoned the relationship, which will likely remain antagonistic for the foreseeable future. Moreover, although the Congolese government once enjoyed a special relationship with Gabon – its late president, Omar Bongo, was married to the late Edith Lucie Nguesso, Sassou Nguesso’s daughter – that bilateral relationship is now strained as well, particularly as Sassou Nguesso aims to shift the diplomatic center of French central Africa from Libreville to Brazzaville.

The Republic of the Congo is committed to subregional organizations, such as the CEMAC and the Economic Community of Central African States (Communauté Economique des Etats de l’Afrique Centrale, CEEAC), as well as to other recently agreed-upon security frameworks. For instance, the Sassou Nguesso regime has contributed troops to subregional, continental and finally – since 2014 – United
Nation peacekeeping forces in the Central African Republic (CAR). Furthermore, it has assumed a mediating role in the CAR conflict scenario, which took a warlike turn in 2013. The Brazzaville government also took part in international subregional agreements on protecting tropical rainforests. In a broader subregional context, the Republic of the Congo is striving to improve its relationship with regional powerhouse South Africa.
Strategic Outlook

The Republic of the Congo remains burdened with political and economic problems. Although the government appears capable of managing sustainable political and economic transformation, it has shown little commitment to do so. Congolese democracy is more of an imposed system, shaped to the advantage of the Sassou Nguesso regime, than a system suitable for developing full-scale democratic structures. Economically, the country is still characterized by a high level of state intervention which benefits the ruling elite. Although, when pressured, the country has taken steps toward introducing and implementing IMF- and World Bank-style policies directed at the emergence of a market economy, the Sassou Nguesso family’s large interests in the oil and timber sectors often impede reforms. Corruption continues to adversely affect considerable parts of the economy and society. Elections reinforced and consolidated autocratic rule, only superficially concealed by formally democratic procedures. President Sassou Nguesso and his political coalition continue to dominate the political scene, while genuine opposition remains marginalized. The Sassou Nguesso regime has little incentive to democratize under pressure from external creditors (IMF, World Bank); with opposition parties weak and fragmented and regime insiders mostly compliant, the primary threats to the ruling coalition come from unanticipated popular uprisings. Regarding the mid- and long-term transformation of the country, ambitious rehabilitation, poverty reduction, and development objectives have been set, formulated within the framework of economic programs related to mid-term agreements concluded with the IMF in 2004 and 2008. Major aims include: consolidate peace and good governance; consolidate the macroeconomic framework and recovery of key productive sectors; improve access to basic social services and social protections; develop basic infrastructure; and strengthen the fight against HIV/AIDS. More recently, the Republic of the Congo introduced a program for growth, employment and poverty reduction in cooperation with the UNDP.

Apart from the macroeconomic agenda, the following factors may be considered essential for the Republic of the Congo in developmental terms:

- An anti-corruption and transparency campaign: Since rampant corruption is one of the main impediments to rehabilitation and development, the fight against it should be intensified. Measures should go beyond economic incentives, specific legislation and administrative measures; the culture of corruption and impunity at the highest levels of government must be targeted. For instance, the education system should combat this culture of corruption.

- Empowerment of women: Women have a major role to play in the country. Thus, empowerment measures – including improvements in education, qualification and literacy – are crucial to the development of the Republic of the Congo. Discrimination against women is a serious impediment to development that can be prevented through increased educational opportunities for girls and women at all levels of the educational system.
• Social service provision to children and youth: Since impoverishment and disillusionment among Congolese youth heavily contributed to the violence of the civil war, the empowerment of children and youth is a vitally important factor for the future development of the country. Empowerment could assume the form of education, vocational training and job creation, as well as the provision of opportunities for leisure-time activities. Peace education, including instruction on nonviolent solutions to conflict situations, would also help greatly in preventing violent conflict.

• Education and training: Given the importance of education and training in the areas stressed above, improvement in education is highly crucial to the future development of the country. Although the importance of education has been identified in various reports, as well as in political action, this issue should receive greater attention.