



The Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville)

The Republic of Congo, also known as Congo-Brazzaville (after its capital), is an oil-rich former French colony in central Africa. It has extensive natural resources, but poor governance and civil conflict have long hindered poverty alleviation and development. Heavily reliant on oil exports, the country is struggling to emerge from an economic crisis precipitated by the collapse of global oil prices in 2014. The price shock sent Congo into a deep recession in 2016-2017; it remains in severe debt distress.

President Denis Sassou Nguesso (“SAH-soo n-GAY-soh”), age 75, is one of Africa’s longest-serving leaders. He has led Congo since 1979, aside from a five-year hiatus during a civil war in the 1990s. U.S. engagement has been limited, with U.S. policy interests focused on Congo’s role in regional stability and maritime security, energy resources and investment potential, and participation in U.S.-backed forest and wildlife conservation projects. U.S.-Congo ties have come under strain periodically due to U.S. concerns with undemocratic and corrupt governance.

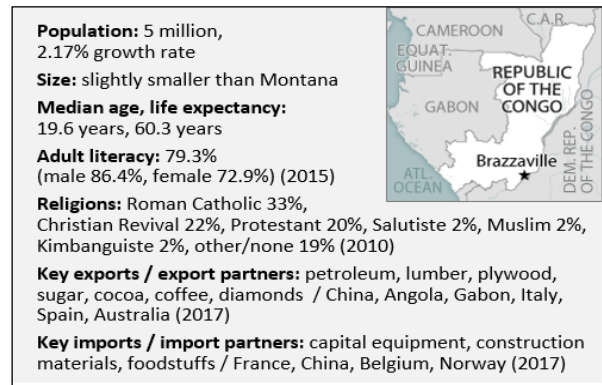
Historical Background

Congo gained independence from France in 1960. Sassou Nguesso, a military colonel, was appointed president by the Congolese Workers Party (PCT, after its French acronym) in 1979. With pressure mounting for democratization, Sassou Nguesso oversaw multiparty polls in 1992, which he lost. A civil war then erupted between rival ethnic and political militias in which some 7,000-11,000 people died. With Angolan troops and French support, Sassou Nguesso retook the presidency by force in 1997. A new constitution was promulgated in 2001 and Sassou Nguesso was returned to office in a flawed presidential election in 2002. All ensuing elections have been marred by irregularities, along with opposition allegations of fraud and institutional bias.

Political and Security Conditions

Sassou Nguesso has centralized power in the presidency and among his family. A new constitution adopted by referendum in 2015 shortened the presidential term from seven to five years but increased the number of permitted terms from two to three and abolished the presidential age limit—clearing the way for Sassou Nguesso to run for reelection again. The referendum drew criticism from the fractious opposition as well as from some allies of Sassou Nguesso. Security forces violently dispersed large street protests. Following the vote, the State Department expressed disappointment with a “deeply flawed process ... marred by violence, intimidation, and severe restrictions on basic freedoms.” Sassou Nguesso went on to win reelection in March 2016. The opposition decried the conditions of the vote, which was held months ahead of schedule amid a telecommunications blackout. Observers documented widespread fraud and irregularities; according to the State Department, some observers that deemed the poll credible “later admitted the government underwrote their work.”

Figure 1. The Republic of Congo at a Glance



Source: CRS graphic. Statistics from CIA World Factbook; 2018 estimates unless otherwise specified.

Shortly after the election, gunmen attacked several security force stations and government buildings in southern zones of the capital—an opposition stronghold and former base of the Ninjas, a militia active during the civil war. In response, the government launched an offensive in the southern Pool region. U.N. officials expressed alarm at reports of mass arrests and torture; Amnesty International alleged that government air strikes hit churches, schools, and medical facilities. Some questioned whether the operation was aimed not at resurgent Ninjas but at political opponents. Security improved after the government signed a peace accord with the Ninjas in late 2017. Thousands of combatants have reportedly demobilized, and authorities have withdrawn an arrest warrant for the Ninjas’ leader.

The PCT and its allies dominate the bicameral legislature. Members of Sassou Nguesso’s immediate family serve in prominent positions in the ruling party, parliament, and state-owned enterprises. Some analysts assess the growing role of the president’s son, Denis-Christel—a member of parliament, diplomatic envoy, and former manager in the national oil company—as a sign that he is being groomed for higher office, possibly the presidency. Denis-Christel has denied rumors of a possible presidential run, however, and many expect his father to seek reelection in 2021.

Human Rights and Governance Issues

Observers documented a deterioration in human and civil rights conditions in 2015-2016 as a number of opposition supporters and activists were arrested, tortured, or forcibly disappeared. Several political detainees were released in 2018, yet dozens remain in prison. Other human rights issues include arbitrary detention and harsh prison conditions, limits on freedom of assembly and association, and impunity. Press freedom has been constrained by state closures of newspapers and expulsions of foreign reporters; journalists reportedly self-censor to evade persecution.

Corruption is widespread. Sassou Nguesso and his family have been targets of a long-running French judicial inquiry

into real estate and other assets allegedly acquired through embezzlement and money laundering. The anticorruption organization Global Witness alleged in 2019 that Claudia Sassou Nguesso, the president's daughter and a member of parliament, used state funds to purchase an apartment in the Trump International Hotel in New York City. Meanwhile, Denis-Christel was named in leaked financial records known as the "Panama Papers" indicating that he had used offshore companies to embezzle oil revenues. Separately, Global Witness has accused Denis-Christel of embezzling over \$50 million in public funds, asserting that some laundered funds passed through the U.S. financial system.

The Economy

Low oil prices since 2014 have weakened Congo's economic outlook. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that Congo's GDP contracted by 2.8% in 2016 and 3.1% in 2017 before rebounding to 0.8% growth in 2018. The IMF projects GDP growth to exceed 5% in 2019 due to rising oil production. Most Congolese remain poor and rely on subsistence farming. Other key sectors include logging, banking, and construction, but corruption and a poor business climate hinder non-oil sector activity.

"Poverty rates in [Congo] remain much higher than in other oil-exporting countries, with 46 percent of the population living under the poverty line. A sizeable middle class with robust education, skills, and material living standards does not exist on a large scale."
- *State Department Investment Climate Statement (2019)*

The oil price slide has exacerbated a fiscal crisis. Congo benefitted from sovereign debt relief in 2010 under a joint IMF-World Bank debt relief program, but external debt surged in the ensuing years to reach 91% of GDP in 2016. According to the IMF, the debt resulted from high public spending financed through loan agreements with China and "nontransparent oil-for-infrastructure barter arrangements" with oil traders. In mid-2019, after Congo and China agreed to a debt restructuring, which was a precondition for IMF support, the IMF approved a \$449 million loan package.

Conservation Concerns

As one of six countries that share the Congo Basin, the world's second-largest area of contiguous tropical rainforest (after the Amazon), Congo faces conservation challenges, including wildlife poaching and trafficking. Roughly two-thirds of Congo's territory remains covered in dense forest, but the conversion of forested areas for agriculture and infrastructure development has contributed to deforestation.

Illegal logging is another driver of forest degradation. A 2014 analysis by Chatham House, a think-tank, found that "around 70–75% of all [timber] harvesting in Congo is illegal in some way." Illegal logging is reportedly driven by demand from emerging economies, notably China.

U.S. Relations and Assistance

U.S.-Congo ties were minimal in the decades after independence as Congo, under a self-declared Marxist regime, established close relations with the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba. Diplomatic ties were severed entirely between 1965 and 1977. Bilateral relations warmed in the 1990s, after the PCT formally disavowed Marxism.

As of September 2018, the State Department characterized U.S.-Congo ties as "positive and cooperative," centering on "strengthening regional security, improving the living standards of Congolese citizens, and safeguarding the environment." The State Department nonetheless regularly documents human rights concerns, limitations on political freedoms, and poor business conditions. Sassou Nguesso has met with U.S. Presidents at the White House twice, in 1990 and 2006, and attended the Obama Administration's 2014 U.S.-Africa Leaders' Summit in Washington, DC.

The United States provides little bilateral aid apart from International Military Education and Training (IMET), with \$150,000 allocated in FY2018 and the same amount requested for FY2019 and FY2020. The United States also has provided regionally and globally allocated security aid to support Congo's contributions to a peacekeeping mission in neighboring Central African Republic (CAR) and its role in maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea. In 2017 and 2018, the State Department ranked Congo as a Tier 3 (worst-performing) country under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA, P.L. 106-386), triggering legal restrictions on certain U.S. aid, including IMET. The Administration waived such restrictions for FY2018 but declined to waive them for FY2019. Congo improved to a Tier 2 Watch List ranking in 2019, which does not trigger aid restrictions for FY2020. The United States also provides humanitarian aid for the Pool region and refugees fleeing CAR and the Democratic Republic of Congo, aid that is not subject to TVPA restrictions. In FY2018, U.S. humanitarian aid obligations totaled roughly \$8.9 million, including \$6.4 million in emergency food assistance.

The United States also provides conservation aid to Congo. In FY2019, Congress appropriated \$40.0 million for the Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE), the primary U.S. government contribution to the multicountry Congo Basin Forest Partnership initiative. USAID and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manage these funds. The State Department has designated Congo a focus country for U.S. antipoaching and counter-wildlife trafficking aid pursuant to the Eliminate, Neutralize, and Disrupt (END) Wildlife Trafficking Act (P.L. 114-231).

Economic ties center on Congo's energy sector, though the value of U.S. oil imports has dropped in the past decade as U.S. domestic supply has increased. U.S. petroleum imports totaled \$407 million in 2018, when they accounted for 94% of U.S. imports from Congo. The State Department reports that U.S. firms "have cited corruption as an impediment to investment, particularly in the petroleum sector." Congo is eligible for duty-free treatment of certain exports to the United States, including oil, under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA, Title I, P.L. 106-200, as amended and extended), but not for expanded apparel export benefits under the act. Congo's deep-water port in Pointe-Noire can receive and send shipments directly with the United States. A bilateral investment treaty entered into force in August 1994. A bilateral Open Skies Air Transport Agreement signed in 2018 affords reciprocal airline market access.

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