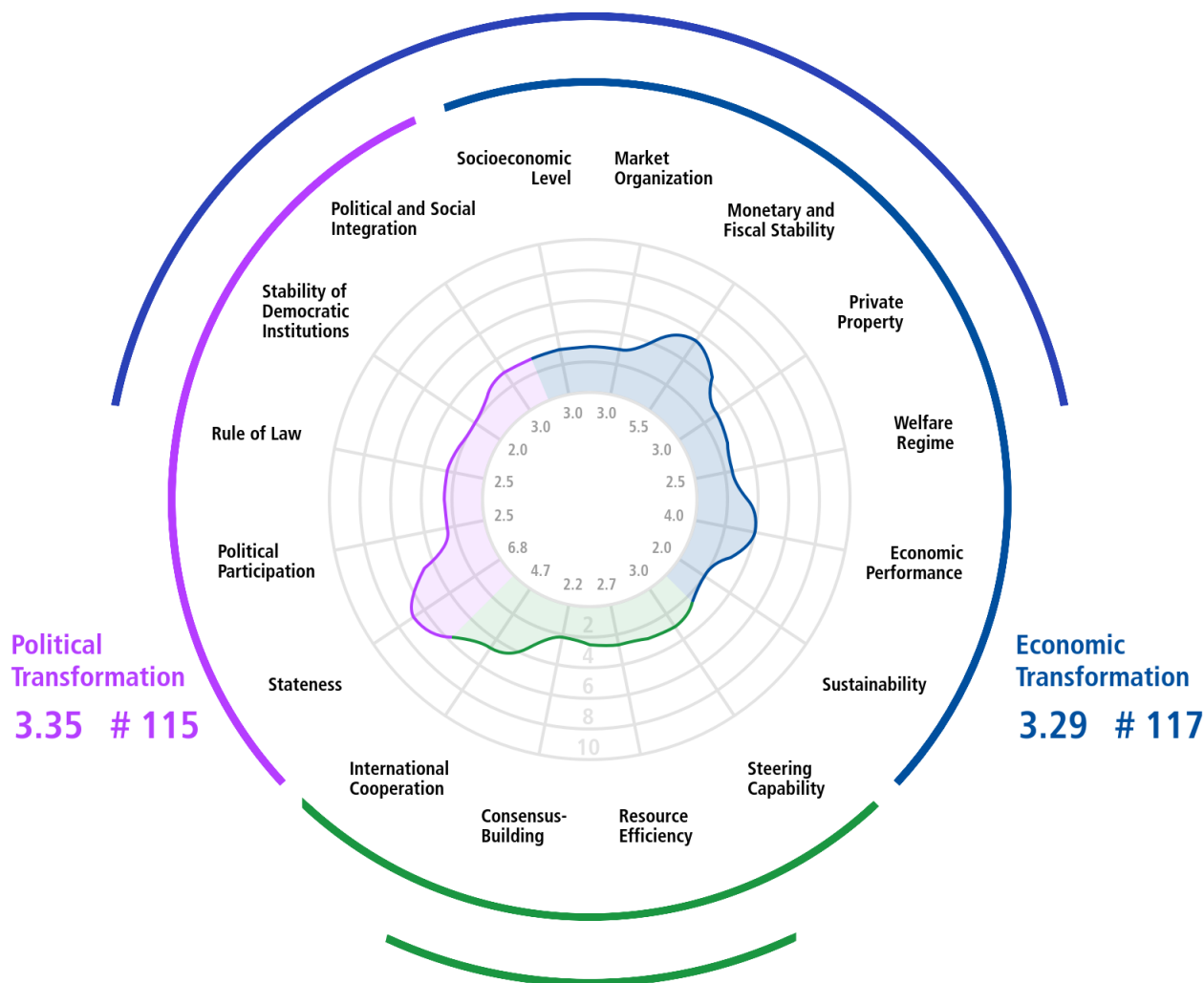


# Congo, Rep.

## Status Index

**3.32 # 119**

on 1-10 scale out of 137



## Governance Index

**2.93 # 122**

on 1-10 scale out of 137

This report is part of the **Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2022**. It covers the period from February 1, 2019 to January 31, 2021. The BTI assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of governance in 137 countries. More on the BTI at <https://www.bti-project.org>.

Please cite as follows: Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2022 Country Report – Congo, Rep.. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022.

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## Contact

Bertelsmann Stiftung  
Carl-Bertelsmann-Strasse 256  
33111 Gütersloh  
Germany

### Sabine Donner

Phone +49 5241 81 81501  
[sabine.donner@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:sabine.donner@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

### Hauke Hartmann

Phone +49 5241 81 81389  
[hauke.hartmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:hauke.hartmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

### Claudia Härterich

Phone +49 5241 81 81263  
[claudia.haerterich@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:claudia.haerterich@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

### Sabine Steinkamp

Phone +49 5241 81 81507  
[sabine.steinkamp@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:sabine.steinkamp@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

**Key Indicators**

Population	M	<b>5.5</b>	HDI	<b>0.574</b>	GDP p.c., PPP \$	<b>3639</b>
Pop. growth <sup>1</sup>	% p.a.	<b>2.5</b>	HDI rank of 189	<b>149</b>	Gini Index	<b>48.9</b>
Life expectancy	years	<b>64.6</b>	UN Education Index	<b>0.543</b>	Poverty <sup>3</sup>	% <b>64.1</b>
Urban population	%	<b>67.8</b>	Gender inequality <sup>2</sup>	<b>0.570</b>	Aid per capita \$	<b>34.8</b>

Sources (as of December 2021): The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2021 | UNDP, Human Development Report 2020. Footnotes: (1) Average annual growth rate. (2) Gender Inequality Index (GII). (3) Percentage of population living on less than \$3.20 a day at 2011 international prices.

## Executive Summary

The current review period in the Republic of the Congo (Congo-Brazzaville) has been marked by the continued political dominance of Denis Sassou Nguesso, rampant high-level corruption, continued dependence on oil, lack of economic diversification and general lack of socioeconomic development. Declining oil production and prices during the review period, and a long-standing record of economic mismanagement have limited economic growth, while recession in non-oil sectors persists. The majority of the population remains engaged in subsistence and informal sectors, which limits social mobility, and reinforces the inequality and mass poverty that continues to characterize the country.

Perhaps most damagingly, state-supported high-level corruption remains rife in the Republic of the Congo, with the most recent examples being the reported siphoning off of state funds by the president's son and daughter.

These behaviors have been emboldened by constitutional changes in 2015, presidential elections in 2016 and legislative elections in 2017, all of which served to reinforce the regime's mandate. Sassou Nguesso will run for re-election in March 2021 in what is expected to be a further fraudulent validation of his mandate. The government remains hostile toward activists and opposition figures, with the 2018 sentencing of General Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko and the 2019 sentencing of André Okombi Salissa, two of Sassou Nguesso's competitors in the 2016 election, to 20 years imprisonment each standing out as key instances thereof. Though disarmament in the aftermath of the 2016–2018 Pool conflict has cooled tensions, such instances of government reprisals indicate the continued emphasis of the government under Sassou Nguesso on minimizing opposition to the regime. An increasingly vocal civil society and at times critical journalists have had minimal impact on government policies and are likewise subject to reprisals, including violence, imprisonment and torture.

The Republic of the Congo continues to fail to meet the basic needs of its population, let alone establish effective multiparty democracy or a market economy. Increased indebtedness to China and dependence on relief from the IMF is likely to place significant strain on the government in the short term. IMF and World Bank policy reform recommendations are rarely implemented or maintained. Displacement by conflict, climate emergencies and domestic degradation pose further risks for the Republic of the Congo's population, while diversification and transparency in key sectors continues to lag. Infrastructural improvements are typically centered on urban areas and fail to elevate rural or impoverished populations. Delivery in key areas, including health care and education, has not improved markedly, and continues to hinder the domestic economy, bureaucratic structures and government accountability.

The Republic of the Congo has not been the hardest hit country in terms of the spread of COVID-19, but the economic impacts of the pandemic are likely to significantly influence the country's short-term priorities and prospects. Though necessary mitigation efforts have been put in place and there has been an effort to reopen the economy, the government's response has been limited in its foresight, and has largely been dependent on relief provided by the IMF and other external donors. A failure to reformulate government priorities, limit repressive responses to protests and violations, or provide a clear long-term strategy for addressing structural inadequacies has limited the Republic of the Congo's ability to respond to the COVID-19 crisis appropriately.

## History and Characteristics of Transformation

The political and economic transformation of the Republic of Congo began in the early 1990s. Domestic and external pressures combined to force the self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist government of Denis Sassou Nguesso, in power since 1979, to take steps to introduce major political and economic change. His regime officially renounced its Marxist-Leninist ideology and, amidst widespread unrest, introduced a multiparty democratic system in 1991, abolishing the single-party rule of the Parti Congolais du Travail (PCT). High oil revenues and autocratic rule had, by this point, brought a modicum of stability to the country, which had faced decades of instability, military coups and political assassinations since gaining independence from France in 1960. Ethnoregional rivalries and disparities, alongside competition for control over the country's oil, its main export, all contributed to periods of instability and crisis.

Under these circumstances, the transformation of the Republic of the Congo became extremely conflict-ridden and would result in significant damage and hardship for the population. Sassou Nguesso and the PCT lost power in the 1992–1993 elections, defeated by a coalition headed by Pascal Lissouba and his Union Panafricaine pour la Démocratie Sociale (UPADS). Despite the shift toward democracy, the Republic of the Congo remained unstable and economically dependent. This opened the door for Sassou Nguesso to regain power in the civil war that accompanied the 1997 elections, and in which the two sides received support from Angola and France, respectively. Thereafter, ethnoregional militias waged war against the authoritarian

regime, with Pool (the region around Brazzaville) becoming the most prominent theater of violence. In the end, the militias were forced by the regime's military might to accept peace. Based on a new multiparty constitution, the president and his PCT-led coalition "organized" their victory in the 2002 elections. In 2003 and 2007, the regime was able to impose peace agreements on the Pool militia, headed by a Pentecostal military commander known as Pasteur Ntoumi.

Sassou Nguesso has claimed victory in each election since 2007, most recently in 2016, amidst widespread and credible reports of fraud and high-level corruption. Employing a carrot-and-stick approach involving access to oil revenues and military force, the regime has managed to integrate "moderate" opposition figures and erstwhile political enemies into its system. The death of several prominent leaders, including MCDDI leader Bernard Kolélas in 2009, strengthened the regime, and aided in integrating the MCDDI and other historical opponents. At the end of 2013, a brief but bloody gun battle occurred in Brazzaville when government forces attempted to arrest Sassou Nguesso's former close ally, Colonel Marcel Ntsourou, who had denounced the Sassou Nguesso regime for widespread corruption. Ntsourou was key to Sassou Nguesso's 1997 return to power and was subsequently held responsible – despite a complete lack of evidence – for a March 2012 arms depot explosion that resulted in at least 300 casualties. When the president's second, and constitutionally last, term approached its end, it became clear that he would pursue a constitutional revision. Several allies defected to the opposition in protest.

The president in 2015 forced through drastic measures to remain in power, which were approved by a referendum that was marked by widespread fraud. Among the changes to be made were the removal of presidential term limits, age limits and a measure to ensure the president cannot be tried domestically for crimes committed while in office. Though the 2015 referendum, and subsequent elections in 2016 and 2017 were marked by mass protests and government repression, Sassou Nguesso claimed 60% of the vote in the March 2016 presidential elections. Sassou Nguesso faced competition from five other candidates, most prominently under the umbrellas of FROCAD and IDC. General Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko and André Okombi Salissa have since been arrested and were sentenced to 20 years imprisonment each in 2018 and 2019. Despite widespread popular opposition to the regime's manufactured victories, with the PCT gaining a significant majority in the 2017 legislative elections as well, government repression has ensured there has been little real change to Sassou Nguesso's hold on power.

In April 2016, just before Sassou Nguesso's inauguration, frustrated citizens set a government building on fire in an opposition neighborhood in Brazzaville. In response, the government launched a military campaign ostensibly against the disbanded Ninja militia headed by Pasteur Ntoumi. This campaign targeted ethnic Lari and was designed to deter future political opposition. A state of emergency was declared, and internet and SMS communications were cut as the government launched airstrikes and undertook a sustained military operation in Pool. NGOs were largely refused access, so the number of casualties (in the thousands) cannot be precisely calculated, though 138,000 people were displaced, and immeasurable damage was caused to homes and villages. This created a dire humanitarian crisis from which the region has

yet to fully recover. A cease-fire was agreed upon in December 2017, with disarmament following in August 2018. Opposition figures, activists and critical journalists continue to face reprisals in the form of arrest, torture and censorship.

With the political system still in the grip of the Sassou Nguesso regime, the transformation of the country's oil-dependent economy from a highly state-interventionist system to a more market-oriented system has been thwarted by the leverage of the strong vested interests of state elites, as well as the conflicts delineated above. Feeling the need to look for economic stabilization after the defeat of the Pool militia (2003), the government reluctantly subordinated its policies to IMF conditions with two mid-term loan arrangements in 2004 and 2008. Massive debt relief, mediated by the IMF and World Bank in 2010, provided some financial reprieve for the country, though debt has again increased in recent years. Transformation toward a socially and ecologically balanced market economy has been sluggish, while poverty and unemployment have challenged the political and economic stability of the country.

When the 2008 loan agreement with the IMF expired in 2011, the government – emboldened by high oil revenues between 2010 and 2014, and Chinese loans – elected not to secure further formal IMF support. Beginning in mid-2014, however, the economy came under severe stress, as global oil demand and prices suffered a downturn, leading to a heavy slump in exports and state revenue. With the need for economic and export diversification more evident than ever, the Republic of the Congo elected, along with other Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) countries, to approach the IMF for support. Though 2017–2018 saw a recovery in revenues, declining production and revenues through much of 2019 and 2020 forced the Republic of the Congo to seek further relief from the IMF as well as a restructuring of the country's significant debt to China. Despite struggles in oil and non-oil sectors alike, the Republic of the Congo has yet to genuinely pursue diversification, which has limited the country's economic transformation. Furthermore, the corruption endemic to the country's resource sectors continues to delegitimize the Sassou Nguesso regime, with decades of ethnoregional cleavages and minimal reinvestment continuing to threaten the country's political transformation.

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

#### 1 | Stateness

As in previous reports, the government's monopoly on the use of force is largely intact throughout the territory, as guaranteed most recently by the 2015 constitution. Though distinct enclaves remain, particularly centered on the Pool region, and border regions with the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, tensions have eased during the current review period.

The crackdown on the Pool region in the aftermath of the 2016 elections came to an official end in 2018 and humanitarian aid, though slow in reaching the population, has demonstrated an increased awareness of the toll of this conflict. Amnesty International and other groups have continued to point to the arbitrary arrest, torture and imprisonment of opposition figures. General Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko and André Okombi Salissa, both former presidential candidates, were sentenced to 20 years of hard labor. Meanwhile, opposition activist Augustin Kala died in May 2019, as a result of injuries suffered while in detention. Such instances continue to challenge the legitimacy of the regime's actions and foster widespread opposition.

In addition to the persistent ethnoregional clashes, represented most recently by the Pool conflict, there remains a distinct risk that instability in neighboring countries will spill over into the Republic of the Congo. Specifically, at the beginning of 2021, there is the distinct risk that renewed clashes in the Central African Republic will spill over. These clashes follow accusations that former president François Bozizé orchestrated a coup against the democratically elected Faustin-Archange Touadéra, who won re-election in the December 2020 elections from which Bozizé was barred from competing. Similarly, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, clashes in areas bordering the Republic of the Congo, such as the Yumbi territory in Mai-Ndombe province, have posed a minor risk of spillover. Importantly, the possibility that refugees from the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo will seek shelter in the Republic of the Congo remains likely in such circumstances, which will put further strain on local communities, though anti-refugee sentiment is not commonly reported.

Question  
Score

Monopoly on the  
use of force

7

'06 '22 10



1

The two main cities of Brazzaville and Pointe Noire remain notorious for petty and violent crime, with specific neighborhoods (e.g., Bacongo and Moungali) often identified as areas of especially high crime.

Despite these limited threats to the state's monopoly on the use of force in its territory, the Sassou Nguesso regime continues to demonstrate a capability and zeal for silencing opposition and quelling resistance before it is able to pose a genuine threat.

The Republic of the Congo's constitution guarantees full citizenship rights to everyone born in the Republic of the Congo, in principle. There remain distinct systemic constraints and inequities, which hinder the full exercise of rights by certain segments of the population. Most immediately, members of Denis Sassou Nguesso's northern Mbochi ethnic group control most positions of power. Meanwhile, Kongo, Lari, Teke and Sangha are marginally represented, and indigenous (Pygmy) populations are not represented at all.

Steps have been taken in this latter regard, however. Most recently, the July 2019 adoption of draft decrees related to Law No. 5-2011 provides special measures for civil registration, access to basic services and education. The law also provided for improved consultation mechanisms with indigenous (Pygmy) populations. It remains to be seen to what degree these steps will be implemented, particularly considering noted abuses of indigenous (Pygmy) populations surrounding the WWF-sponsored Messok-Dja protected forest area.

Women are drastically underrepresented, with only 11% of seats in the National Assembly held by women.

Beyond these systemic constraints, Sassou Nguesso loyalists from his home region of Cuvette continue to dominate the police, the gendarmerie and military forces. As has been noted in previous reports, this is consistent with the concentration and centralization of authority under Sassou Nguesso, and clear efforts to minimize the threats posed by opposition groups. These efforts have, naturally, served to diminish the legitimacy of the regime and further marginalize certain groups, particularly in the south of the country and among its traditional semi-nomadic forest peoples.

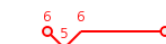
The Republic of the Congo is highly Christianized, with a large Catholic population. However, the state remains constitutionally and functionally secular. Most elites are Protestant or Catholic, but there remains a distinct separation and the interference of religious dogma in political functions is prohibited.

Precise recent demographic data is largely unavailable, but around 90% of the population are Christian, with about two-thirds of these Catholic, and the other third mostly Protestant, Evangelical or Pentecostal. Around 2% to 3% of the population are Muslim, while the remainder of the population are animist. Combining traditional religions with Christian or Muslim dogma is not uncommon, particularly in rural areas.

#### State identity

6

'06 \_\_\_\_\_ '22 10



1

#### No interference of religious dogmas

10

'06 \_\_\_\_\_ '22 10



1



Despite its relative homogeneity in this regard, the Republic of the Congo is recognized as one of the states in Africa in which discrimination or conflict based on religion is nearly nonexistent. Regional differences remain the most potent sources of favoritism and conflict.

As in previous periods, the state remains hampered by high-level corruption, ethnoregional disparities and low administrative capabilities outside of the major cities, despite continued efforts toward a centralized public sector.

Sassou Nguesso continues to work to integrate a disproportionate amount of ethnoregional loyalists from the Cuvette region into public administration. Resources and services have thus largely been targeted toward this region in the north, in addition to the major cities of Brazzaville and Pointe Noire. Underinvestment in public goods in other regions persists, with these areas often among the first to suffer during times of economic crisis, such as during the current crisis.

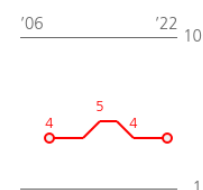
Though displaced persons have returned and the Pool region has started to recover, humanitarian aid remains limited and public services are recovering slowly. Furthermore, severe flooding has ravaged the north of the country since late 2019, with the Congo and Ubangi rivers flooding most recently in July 2020, which has affected around 200,000 people. Government responses, though rhetorically strong, have failed to sufficiently meet the basic sanitation, housing, health or education needs of those impacted.

Only about 15% of the population have access to improved sanitation facilities, while only about 45% of the population use safely managed drinking water, which drops as low as 19% in rural areas. Amidst COVID-19, Congo has been identified by UNICEF as experiencing disruptions in the delivery of key services, including family planning, HIV treatment, immunization, management of waste, prenatal care, TB treatments, other health services, civil registration, food distribution and violence prevention/response.

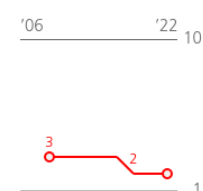
## 2 | Political Participation

Denis Sassou Nguesso has been president of the Republic of the Congo since 1979, with the exception of a five-year period between 1992 and 1997. He has been re-elected three times since regaining power, in 2002, 2009 and 2016, and has consistently been accused of defrauding elections as well as employing force and ethnoregional favoritism to stifle opposition. Sassou Nguesso will run for re-election again in March 2021 following the 2015 constitutional amendments which removed presidential term limits and age restrictions. Though free and fair elections with universal suffrage are guaranteed by the constitution, the reality is that the current regime is an autocracy, with ministerial, judicial, legislative and cabinet

Basic  
administration  
4



Free and fair  
elections  
2



positions all in the hands of Sassou Nguesso loyalists. Elections are thoroughly fraudulent and accompanied by violent clashes between protesters and government forces. In the most recent (2017) legislative elections, Sassou Nguesso's PCT and its allies gained 108 out of 151 seats in the National Assembly. However, low turnout, credible allegations of widespread fraud and the suspension of election services in nine Pool districts all contributed to the illegitimacy of the 2017 results.

The unlawful arrest, detention and sentencing of opposition figures remain frequent, with the March 2019 sentencing of André Okombi Salissa standing out as a key instance during the review period. The significant constraints placed on political parties limit the number and viability of these groups when positioned in opposition to the regime. Opposition parties often claim turnout is far below official figures, while international observers are frequently denied access. Opposition leaders are often arbitrarily arrested and frequently tortured if they pose a genuine threat to the Sassou Nguesso regime. In short, elections in the Republic of the Congo remain far from free and fair.

Sassou Nguesso gained power via force and has maintained his reign through apparently fraudulent elections, granting his regime no democratic legitimacy. There is no mechanism to remove the president from office, presidents cannot be tried for acts committed while in office. Furthermore, given the large number of loyalists in the government office, there is little prospect of genuine accountability or constraints to Sassou Nguesso's authority emerging. Catholic clergy members occasionally offer vocal criticism, particularly in the area of corruption, but this does not result in genuine reform. Landowners are largely subordinate or loyal to Denis Sassou Nguesso.

Despite the lack of legitimacy or veto powers, Sassou Nguesso has proven relatively capable of maintaining domestic security. According to a report by the U.S. Department of State, civilian authorities generally maintained effective control over the security forces.

Important external partners, including the IMF, France and China, wield significant influence over economic operations in the Republic of the Congo, but agreements rarely manifest in government reform. Much of the Republic of the Congo's debt is held by China, who agreed to restructure a portion in April 2019, while the IMF is a frequent source of loans and bailouts, such as in July 2019. Though these could theoretically be leveraged as veto powers, the government has altered its approach little, particularly in times of high revenue.

The Republic of the Congo's continued dependence on its natural resource wealth has limited the degree to which the government has genuinely combated corruption. As a result, opaque, in-kind agreements remain the norm and benefits rarely reach the majority of the populace. Such economic practices are symptomatic of the larger illegitimacy and unrepresentativeness of the Republic of the Congo's institutions, with voters' desires rarely evident in policy outcomes.

Effective power to govern

2

'06 '22 10

2 1

Freedoms of assembly and speech are codified under the 2015 constitution and provide all citizens freedoms of expression and association. In practice, however, the government continues to ignore these rights in instances where the authority or legitimacy of the regime is challenged. The arbitrary arrest, torture and sentencing of opposition figures, and violent responses to protests and strikes remain areas for concern.

Major political parties are organized along ethnoregional lines, leaving little room for ideological or policy-driven parties. There is no independent oversight committee, so political parties must register with the government, which often arbitrarily rejects candidates' or parties' applications for registration. The government targeting of citizen workers or protesters remains common, and violent clashes have accompanied most elections, including the most recent ones in 2016 and 2017.

Companies or organizations related or friendly to the Sassou Nguesso regime are often recipients of favorable treatment in trade and labor disputes, with the interests of trade unions and other labor organizations remaining overshadowed by the patrimonial networks surrounding Congo's resources and limited industries. Striking workers and labor protesters frequently face government violence or arrest, as do movement leaders and journalists who challenge the regime.

Further restrictions to freedom of movement have been introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Government restrictions include the closure of borders and airports until August 2020, the compulsory wearing of face masks, a strictly enforced curfew, and limitations on group gatherings. Many of these restrictions remain in effect as of January 2021. There have been no reports of the disproportionate enforcement of these new restrictions, but security forces (including the police and gendarmerie) are frequently accused of using excessive force. There are widespread suspicions that the government will ban public gatherings during the March 2021 elections to prevent protests.

The freedom of expression is codified in the constitution for all citizens, political and civil society organizations, and the mass media, including online media. However, in practice, the government rarely respects these rights when it comes to criticism of the regime or government policy. For example, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, news anchor Rocil Otouna was suspended by state broadcaster Tele Congo following an interview with the justice minister in which Otouna posed difficult questions related to COVID-19. This instance implies a broader effort to limit available public information related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Such instances are not infrequent in the Republic of the Congo, with the government and its partners frequently placing restrictions on the press and citizens' expression. Self-censorship is common among journalists and opposition leaders,

Association /  
assembly rights

3

'06 '22 10



1

Freedom of  
expression

3

'06 '22 10



1

including André Okombi Salissa, are frequently arrested for challenging state security. Arbitrary arrests, torture while in custody and disproportionate sentences remain key tools used by Sassou Nguesso's regime to silence opposition and maintain domestic security.

### 3 | Rule of Law

There are formal checks and balances, and separation of power between the presidency, legislature and judiciary, as codified in the 2002 and 2015 constitutions. However, in reality, these only exist on paper. The judiciary, National Assembly and media are all effectively controlled by Sassou Nguesso or those in his inner circle, ensuring near-complete centralization of power and decision-making within the executive. No mechanism exists to legally remove the president from office and the 2015 constitution removed limitations on the president's ability to remain in office.

The Constitutional Court and other courts almost always reaffirm government decisions/stances. Meanwhile, the National Assembly is under the control of Sassou Nguesso's ruling PCT party and leadership positions are occupied by Sassou Nguesso loyalists. The media is largely under the control of the regime, including the state-run Radiodiffusion Télévision Congolaise (RTC) and Sassou Nguesso-owned Dépêches de Brazzaville, and thus rarely contradicts or challenges the regime.

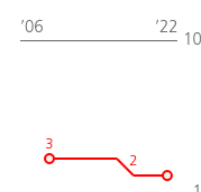
The Republic of the Congo declared a state of emergency on March 14, 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been reviewed and reaffirmed multiple times. Restrictions on large gatherings (over 50 people) resulted in reductions to the function of the legislature. The government has worked to silence criticism of its handling of COVID-19, like previous crises, including the suspension of a news anchor from the state-run news broadcast network. In all, whether in response to COVID-19 or constitutional changes to expand his authority, Sassou Nguesso's autocratic tendencies continue to dominate Congolese politics, and severely restrict available checks and balances, and the separation of powers.

The independence of the judiciary was codified most recently in the 2015 constitution. However, in practice, the impartiality of the courts is severely undermined by loyalties to the regime. The Constitutional Court and other high-level courts have often been used by Sassou Nguesso as a political tool to target opposition leaders, including in 2016, 2017, 2018 and the March 2019 sentencing of former presidential candidate André Okombi Salissa to 20 years of hard labor.

At lower levels and outside of political considerations, there is a degree of decentralization to the Republic of the Congo's court system, particularly in rural areas where traditional courts and other mechanisms supplement the limited reach

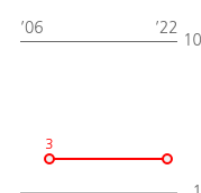
Separation of powers

2



Independent judiciary

3



of the central government. The political nature of higher courts has overburdened lower-level courts and at times starved them of necessary funds, which is augmented by endemic corruption and weak administrative capabilities outside of major urban areas.

As in previous review periods, the Republic of Congo's government is among the most corrupt in the world and is riddled by a lack of transparency, particularly in natural resource industries. The Republic of Congo ranks low in international assessments of corrupt practices worldwide. Though the regime's rhetoric, particularly when seeking an IMF bailout or restructuring with creditors, indicates an interest in combating corruption and improving transparency. There has been no real progress in this direction during the review period.

High-profile instances of corruption involving the president's inner circle persist, including the April 2019 revelations that Claudia Sassou Nguesso (the president's daughter and a member of the National Assembly) stole \$20 million in state funds and the August 2019 revelations that Denis Christel Sassou Nguesso (the president's son and a member of the National Assembly) stole \$50 million from the government treasury via shell companies. Denis Christel Sassou Nguesso was subject of an investigation by U.S. authorities, which became made public in June 2020.

Accountability remains virtually nonexistent. Due to the nature of much of this corruption and Sassou Nguesso's presence at the heart of these complex networks, the judiciary and legislature are essentially powerless to combat corruption without risking their own positions. Beyond the occasional scapegoating of low-level officials or public pressure from CSOs and the Catholic Church, there is little indication of high-level interest in combating or prosecuting corruption. Under the 2015 constitution, the president cannot be charged for crimes committed while in office.

As in previous review periods, the Republic of the Congo's de jure respect of the civil and human rights of all of its citizens does not match the de facto activities of the government. Opposition to the regime is frequently suppressed. For example, protests surrounding the 2015 constitution and 2016 elections culminated in government crackdowns on the Pool region. Likewise, politically motivated detentions and torture are common, as demonstrated by the May 2019 death of opposition activist Augustin Kala Kala reportedly due to injuries sustained while in government custody.

A woman arrested in September 2020 for not wearing a mask amidst the COVID-19 pandemic died while in custody, which sparked protests in the town of Nkayi. The government responded to the situation by increasing the regime's security presence in the area and suppressing public outrage.

#### Prosecution of office abuse

3

'06 '22 10

3

1

#### Civil rights

2

'06 '22 10

3

2

1

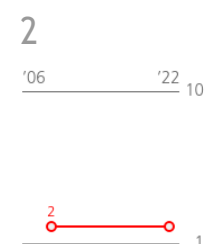
Women, children and ethnic minorities (particularly non-Bantu indigenous peoples/pygmies) are at particular risk of being abused, raped or involuntarily forced to work. The government frequently ignores the human rights concerns of these groups. Reports in 2019 revealed abuses of indigenous (Pygmy) populations surrounding the establishment of the WWF-supported Messok Dja forest park by ecoguards, which exemplify the lack of consultation with and consideration for the rights of these groups. Though 2019 saw the introduction of laws that sought to improve the representation of and consultation with indigenous (Pygmy) peoples, these laws have yet to yield genuine improvement. Internal displacement in the north of the country, as a result of significant flooding in 2019 and 2020, has likewise not been adequately addressed, and the rights and livelihoods of these populations have consequently suffered.

#### 4 | Stability of Democratic Institutions

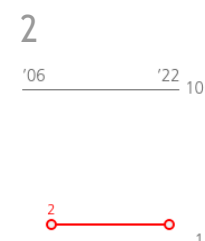
As has been the case throughout his tenure, and despite stable structures, institutionalized democratic structures and a separation of the branches of government in principle, Sassou Nguesso's regime remains essentially authoritarian. Legislative elections in 2017 and presidential elections in 2016 were preceded by widely protested constitutional changes in 2015, which served to extend Sassou Nguesso's mandate and protect him from domestic prosecution. Opposition to such expansions of authority is often met by violent government crackdowns, including in the Pool region in the aftermath of the 2016 election. Sassou Nguesso is expected to run for re-election in March 2021 in what will likely be a heavily disputed and potentially fraudulent election. Though this is beyond the scope of the present report, it is not unreasonable to suspect that the COVID-19 pandemic, if not eradicated by then, could further limit the accessibility and legitimacy of the outcome.

As in previous reports, the commitment of key actors to democratic institutions in the Republic of the Congo is nearly nonexistent. With immunity from domestic prosecution, rejection of the International Criminal Court, and a clear willingness to respond to dissent with force and arbitrary detention, Sassou Nguesso and those close to him operate with impunity and exercise strict control over Congo's political, economic and social functions. Citizens and civil society have few, if any, avenues to genuinely challenge the regime or shape its actions. The COVID-19 emergency protocols, which were in place between March 2020 and January 2021, restricted large gatherings, which in turn curtailed the operation of the National Assembly and elicited widespread suspicion that the ban was intended to suppress electoral protests during the March 2021 elections.

Performance of democratic institutions



Commitment to democratic institutions



## 5 | Political and Social Integration

The organization of political parties in the Republic of the Congo remains highly regionalized and based on ethnic loyalties, with national interests often co-opted or crippled by the dominance of the ruling PCT. Noteworthy opposition is provided by UPADS, founded by the ousted Pascal Lissouba (who died in August 2020), but the PCT and its allies won 108 out of 151 seats in 2017 (96 for PCT). Though 1990 saw a transition toward multiparty democracy and the formation of over 100 parties, many of these parties are now inactive or have been co-opted. In reality, the ethnoregional makeup of parties and domination of the ruling PCT allow Sassou Nguesso to maintain a de facto one-party state with only a façade of multiparty democracy.

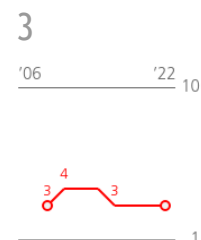
As support is highly regionalized and based on ethnic loyalties, programmatic differences are almost absent. Clientelism plagues the system and state repression results in weak, internally divided opposition parties or coalitions. These issues make for a highly unstable, ineffective party system in which the former single-party state continues to be dominated by the PCT and coalition partners loyal to Sassou Nguesso.

Interest groups, NGOs and civil society organizations exist and function to a certain degree in the Republic of the Congo. However, their activities remain largely limited by government dependence and repression at the national level. Trade unions are legally protected, but these laws are oftentimes not enforced. The regime has for years participated in the harassment and arrest of workers and union leaders in an effort to intervene in disputes, most notably against the Congolese Trade Union Federation (CSC), the largest union in the country. Though the narrow concerns of workers are addressed to some extent by such groups, the government frequently undermines progress toward improved representation or remuneration.

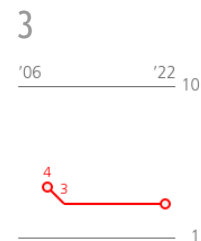
The concerns of minority groups, non-northerners, women and other groups at risk due to their identity are largely unrepresented and unaddressed on the national level. Some legal improvements to the rights of indigenous (Pygmy) peoples were introduced in 2019, but their impact remains limited. The Catholic Church has often served as an important critic of the government's lack of transparency and corrupt nature.

The Congolese Observatory of Human Rights (OCDH) serves as perhaps the most valuable domestic monitor in this regard. However, government actions limit the effectiveness of such groups. The head of OCDH was prevented from leaving the country in May 2019. In March 2019, the Brazzaville office of a group focused on prisoners' rights was robbed, an event that many suspect was a government attempt to intimidate the group.

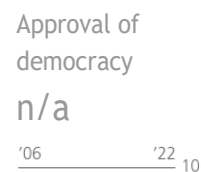
Party system



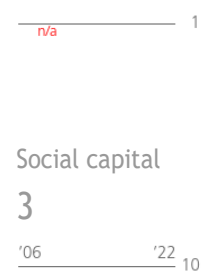
Interest groups



As in previous review periods, there remains no available data on citizens' views on or approval of democratic institutions. Unofficial turnout as low as 15% contrasts with official turnout around 70% and indicates the relative illegitimacy of democratic processes in the Republic of the Congo. The potentially low turnout and illegitimate processes should not be taken as an indication of low public approval of democratic norms. Frequent protests surrounding elections indicates a desire among the citizenry for genuine political choice and multiparty democracy. Potential limitations on participation in presidential elections in March 2021 and the likely re-election of Sassou Nguesso could further weaken public trust in state institutions, however.



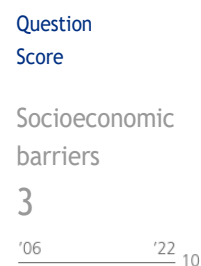
Though the Republic of the Congo's legacy of state repression and ethnoregional division has limited the extent to which social organizations can organize on the national stage, local groupings (e.g., family and community, and women's and minority groups) continue to serve an important role in self-organization. In contrast to the national level, such local groups are characterized by high levels of trust, as was recently evident in the peaceable integration of 16,000 conflict refugees from the neighboring Yumbi territory in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The continued promotion of Cuvette regionals loyal to Sassou Nguesso means that minority groups and the highly populated south of the country remain largely unrepresented and localized. Given the already limited nature of such groups, restrictions on large group gatherings, which have been in place since March 2020 to address the spread of COVID-19, could further restrict organization and public trust.



## II. Economic Transformation

### 6 | Level of Socioeconomic Development

The Republic of the Congo continues to rely disproportionately on its oil sector, both as a source of government revenue and as leverage for additional financing. Recent figures are largely unavailable, but around 40% of the population remains employed in agriculture and a majority in subsistence or informal sectors. The overall unemployment rate is estimated to be 9%, while youth unemployment remains around 20%. These figures are likely to have been exacerbated by the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with far lower oil prices than expected significantly influencing the performance of the Republic of the Congo's economy.



Despite a recovery in oil prices in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered this trajectory, with prices dropping as low as \$19.12 per barrel in April 2020 and closing 2020 below \$50 per barrel. Previous periods of diminished oil revenues





have been accompanied by significant cuts to social services and an increase in public debt, which is expected to recur in 2021. Public debt increased to 88% of GDP in 2019 and external debt stood at 62% of GDP, despite restructuring debts to China. Though expansion in areas such as iron ore, lead, zinc, copper and other minerals has occurred and will likely continue, progress has been slow and oil accounts for 55% of GDP, 85% of exports and 80% of tax revenue. The Republic of the Congo's economy contracted by 8.6% in 2020.

According to the United Nations' Human Development Reports, the Republic of the Congo received a Human Development Index (HDI) score of 0.574 and ranks 149 out of 189 countries. Even in times of economic surplus due to expanded oil revenues, benefits from key sectors rarely impact the day-to-day lives of citizens. Multidimensional poverty was estimated to affect 24.3% of the population, with a Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) score of 0.112. Overall, 37% of the population lives below the poverty line of \$1.90 (PPP) a day.

Inequality remains a significant issue in the Republic of the Congo, with a Gini coefficient of 48.9, 37.9% of national wealth concentrated in the hands of the richest 10% of the population and an overall loss in HDI due to inequality of 25.1%. The Republic of the Congo's inequality-adjusted HDI score was 0.430. The country's score in the Gender Inequality Index (GII) was 0.570. As has been the case in previous reports, the Republic of the Congo remains hamstrung by a lack of economic diversification or industrialization, which leaves the majority of the population dependent on subsistence or informal sectors and living under or near the poverty line. The country's elites, including President Sassou Nguesso and his inner circle, enjoy significant wealth, while the majority of the population remains highly vulnerable to the impacts of economic shocks and resource dependence. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this economic situation and is likely to result in significant reductions in social services and economic opportunities.

Economic indicators		2017	2018	2019	2020
GDP	\$ M	11109.0	13642.7	12693.6	<b>10884.7</b>
GDP growth	%	-4.4	-4.8	0.2	<b>-7.9</b>
Inflation (CPI)	%	0.5	1.2	2.2	<b>1.8</b>
Unemployment	%	9.8	9.7	9.6	<b>10.3</b>

Economic indicators		2017	2018	2019	2020
Foreign direct investment	% of GDP	39.8	31.6	26.5	-
Export growth	%	14.4	11.4	7.4	<b>-8.5</b>
Import growth	%	-34.5	5.1	3.2	<b>-10.4</b>
Current account balance	\$ M	-	-	-	-
Public debt	% of GDP	94.2	77.1	81.7	<b>101.1</b>
External debt	\$ M	4613.6	4223.5	5174.8	<b>5149.0</b>
Total debt service	\$ M	346.9	441.3	507.1	<b>660.0</b>
Net lending/borrowing	% of GDP	-5.6	5.4	-	-
Tax revenue	% of GDP	11.3	7.8	-	-
Government consumption	% of GDP	19.3	14.6	13.3	<b>16.4</b>
Public education spending	% of GDP	4.4	3.0	3.9	-
Public health spending	% of GDP	1.2	0.8	-	-
R&D expenditure	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Military expenditure	% of GDP	4.2	2.5	2.7	<b>3.4</b>

Sources (as of December 2021): The World Bank, World Development Indicators | International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Military Expenditure Database.

## 7 | Organization of the Market and Competition

The Republic of the Congo has frequently sought to assure the IMF and other key creditors that it has made strides toward economic diversification and tackling corruption. However, these assurances rarely exceed rhetoric once agreements have been reached. China serves as the Republic of the Congo's key external creditor, and agreed to a restructuring of debts in 2019, but does not require such structural assurances given its emphasis on access to natural resources. The IMF estimates that the Republic of the Congo's external debt was \$9.5 billion in 2019, 85.5% of GDP.

State-owned enterprises dominate key sectors, with the most notable being the state oil company SNPC. These companies wield significant influence and are virtually monopolies controlled by the country's elites and external patrons.

Despite some minor improvements in property rights and government spending, the Republic of the Congo scored 41.8 in the Heritage Foundation's 2020 Index of Economic Freedom, ranking 176 out of 180 countries for economic freedom.

Market  
organization

3

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3

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Though this is a slight improvement over the previous reporting period, the country retained a ranking of 46 out of 47 sub-Saharan African countries, and far underperforms regional and world averages. The Republic of the Congo performs particularly poorly for fiscal health, macroeconomic stability, debt sustainability, public integrity, efficiency and transparency, judicial effectiveness, and business and labor freedoms.

A large proportion of the population continues to be employed in subsistence or informal sectors, accounting for more than 80% of total employment. The main sectors in the informal economy are the trade in foodstuffs and agribusiness, which account for much of the private sector growth in the Republic of the Congo. As in previous reporting periods, weak infrastructure, particularly in electricity and internet, as well as low education standards and accessibility hinder the overall function and openness of the Republic of the Congo's economy. The country scored 39.5 in the World Bank's 2020 Ease of Doing Business report, ranking 180 out of 190 countries, far below regional and global averages. It takes 164 days to secure a construction permit and 134 days to get electricity. Starting a business takes 49.5 days, 10.5 procedures and a cost of 62.2% of per capita GNI. For starting a business, the Republic of the Congo scored 65.8 and ranked 179 out of 190 countries.

As has been the case in previous review periods, there is no available information on anti-trust or monopoly legislation in the Republic of the Congo. There is clear evidence of monopolistic behavior by state-run enterprises in key sectors, most notably SNPC in the oil sector. The Republic of the Congo scored zero out of four for both safeguards against corruption and transparency, with Sassou Nguesso's patrimonial network continuing to dominate the domestic economy. Sassou Nguesso's son and daughter were both accused in 2019 of siphoning off significant sums from the state's oil revenues. The monopolistic behavior of key state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and corrupt networks surrounding the Congo's natural resources ensures there is minimal genuine competition or prospects for the growth of the private sector in the short term.

The Republic of the Congo remains heavily dependent on foreign trade, with exports and imports totaling 122% of GDP in 2019. Despite the importance of trade, however, genuine liberalization has been slow at best. The Heritage Foundation noted no improvement in trade freedom. Trade is further hindered by non-tariff barriers and lackluster openness to foreign investment. The Republic of the Congo ranked 183 out of 190 countries in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Trading Across Borders metric, with a score of 19.7. Foreign direct investment stood at 27.44% of GDP in 2019 and the investment framework is viewed as inadequate. The simple average MFN applied tariff was 11.4% in 2016 (most recent data).

The Republic of the Congo has been a member of OPEC since 2018, theoretically extending its interactions with and openness to international cooperation. However, this is unlikely to have much impact on its susceptibility to oil markets in the short

#### Competition policy

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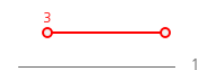
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#### Liberalization of foreign trade

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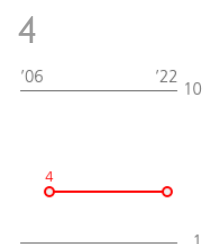
run. Despite at times rhetorically committing to trade liberalization and greater openness, particularly in times of economic crisis such as surrounded its 2019 IMF bailout, there has been little improvement in key areas related to trade or the operation of the domestic market. Improvements in electricity, internet and basic services continue to lag, which further inhibits foreign trade and investment. Increased relations with and dependence on China is unlikely to impact on the general lack of domestic efficiency or transparency, let alone the corrupt networks surrounding the Congo's resources of which China has increasingly taken advantage.

As in previous review periods, the number of commercial banks active in the Republic of the Congo barely exceeds 10, despite growth in this area over the past decade. Many of these banks are in the hands of foreign, especially French or Moroccan, interests as well as members of the Sassou Nguesso family, as in the case of BGF I Bank Congo. There is no stock market, while monetary policy is determined by the Central Bank of the Central African States (BEAC) within the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) framework.

Banking penetration in the Republic of the Congo is estimated to be between 5% and 7%, though some reports indicate a higher rate. Excess cost, limited accessibility and endemic poverty continue to pose challenges to improving this area. The bank capital to assets ratio stood at 17.7% in 2019, while 23% of bank loans were non-performing. It remains unclear to what degree these metrics will be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the general susceptibility of the Republic of the Congo's financial systems to global fluctuations implies negative short-term prospects for loan repayments.

The Republic of the Congo's financial system remains underdeveloped and dominated by banks. Overall financial intermediation is low. The country remains stricken by endemic corruption and a lack of transparency, which further hinder the development of a functioning domestic capital market. Progress in microfinance and electronic banking have been limited by the lack of necessary administrative or infrastructural structures.

Banking system



## 8 | Monetary and fiscal stability

As a member of the CFA franc zone and CEMAC, the Republic of the Congo's monetary policy is largely shaped by foreign actors, particularly CEMAC's central bank BEAC and the European Union. Such institutions control the rate and exchange of currency in the Republic of the Congo, generating a degree of financial stability and predictability that might be absent otherwise. Nonetheless, inflation fluctuates regularly, ranging from 7.5% in 2009 to 0.4% in 2010, 6.1% in 2012, 0.45% in 2017 and 2.2% in 2019.

Unlike preceding instances (e.g., 2014), the IMF's 2019 bailout of the Republic of the Congo did not include any significant measures to promote anti-inflationary or austerity policies. During times of economic surplus, the government rarely follows IMF advice on economic or financial responsibility. Due to its CEMAC membership, little consideration is given to monetary policy domestically. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, CEMAC introduced monetary easing measures in March and July 2020, which included decreasing the policy rate and extending government purchases of securities.

The IMF has acknowledged BEAC's objective of maintaining stability and expanding global appeal, but it remains to be seen what progress will be made in this regard. Membership in OPEC since 2018 may indicate greater openness and stability, but corruption and dependence on oil continue to present significant impediments.

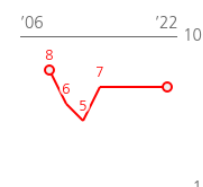
There are no legal restrictions on foreign exchange, including the conversion, transfer or repatriation of funds. Large transfers (e.g., over \$10,000) must be recorded per CEMAC regulations. Given its fixed exchange rate to the euro (€1 to XAF 655.957), foreign exchange is widely available and the Central African CFA franc is fully convertible, though limitations in banking penetration pose challenges. The exchange rate fluctuates according to those of the euro.

The Republic of the Congo continues to oscillate between anti-IMF fiscal policies in times of economic boom (e.g., 2017) and IMF-induced austerity in times of distress. The IMF estimates the cost of the Republic of the Congo's recovery from COVID-19 to be XAF 100 billion (\$170 million), with expenses up to November 2020 equating to XAF 75 billion (\$140 million). The World Bank has pledged an additional \$11.3 million in COVID-19 relief and has suspended the Republic of the Congo's debt service. Government spending in the Republic of the Congo has increased by less than 2.5% in response to COVID-19.

External debt was estimated by the World Bank to be \$5.18 billion, while the IMF estimate stood at \$9.5 billion, in 2019. The Heritage Foundation estimates public debt to be 98.5% of GDP, with budget deficits averaging 7.5% of GDP in 2017–

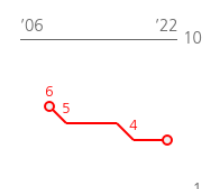
### Monetary stability

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### Fiscal stability

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2019. Government spending has averaged 38.2% of GDP in the same period. Total reserves stood at \$424 million in 2018 (most recent data), down from \$5 billion in 2014. Given mounting pressures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the strain provided by the country's dependence on oil and endemic corruption, and despite IMF relief and the restructuring of debt to China in 2019, the Republic of the Congo is expected to remain in severe debt distress in the near term.

## 9 | Private Property

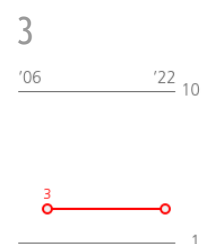
As in previous review periods, the state apparatus under Sassou Nguesso maintains significant control over property and resources in key sectors, particularly oil, timber and minerals. The property rights regime is largely designed to maintain this system through state-owned enterprises and the inconsistent enforcement/protection of property rights. SNPC, the state-owned oil company, is directly controlled by members of Sassou Nguesso's family, with little avenue for oversight. Contract terms are not transparent and enforcement mechanisms are vulnerable to corruption and political influence. Domination of the market by SOEs, endemic clientelism, corruption surrounding Sassou Nguesso and his inner circle, and an ineffective judiciary further limit the degree to which property rights can be protected.

According to the Heritage Foundation, enforcement of property rights is generally inconsistent for the population. Contract terms are not transparent and "informal" tax collectors regularly solicit bribes.

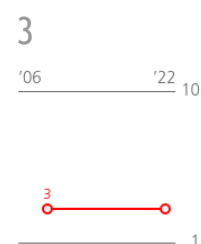
The Republic of the Congo ranked 180 out of 190 countries in the World Bank's Doing Business Index 2020, unchanged from the previous review period. Starting a business takes 49.5 days and 10.5 procedures, both slightly worse than in 2019, though its ranking in this regard (179) remains unchanged. Registering property takes 54 days and five procedures, ranking 174 out of 190 countries – an improvement over 2019. Taxes on profit are 54.3% (rank 185), which remains unchanged from 2019. Enforcement of contracts remains below the sub-continent average, ranking 155 out of 190 countries.

Due to the domination of SOEs and joint ventures in the domestic market, there is little appetite for privatization, though there has been no effort to expand state influence over private enterprises amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Significant public investment has long characterized key sectors, including oil, timber, banking, farming, mining and tourism. Despite external (IMF and World Bank) efforts in the past to promote privatization, efforts to this end have been limited and superficial, with little progress in combating the clientelist network surrounding Sassou Nguesso and his allies.

### Property rights



### Private enterprise



## 10 | Welfare Regime

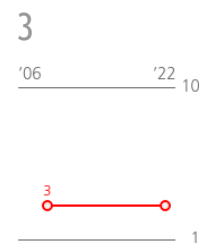
Socioeconomic conditions have generally improved for the population of the Republic of the Congo over the past decade. However, the sustained contraction of oil prices since 2014 and the government's history of economic mismanagement have starved the state of necessary revenues and limited social expenditures over the past five years. Health care expenditure in 2018 (most recent data) accounted for 2.14% of GDP, down from roughly 3.5% in 2016. Life expectancy has continued to increase since 2000, standing at 64.3 years in 2018. Of children under five years old, 26% suffered from chronic malnutrition, while 40% of indigenous (Pygmy) children were chronically malnourished.

Around half of the population of the Republic of the Congo lives in poverty, vulnerable employment stands at 76% and the child (ages five to 14) labor rate is 25.4%, with 27.1% of children aged seven to 14 combining work and school. Consequently, the country's population continues to suffer from significant socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Social safety nets and pension schemes do exist but are only available for the few workers employed in the formal sector. Only 22.1% of eligible individuals receive old-age pensions. The needy often rely on support from family members or other informal safety nets. Refugees, foreign workers and especially indigenous (Pygmy) peoples experience discrimination in accessing key social services, housing, employment and education.

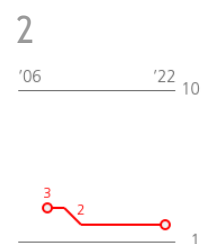
Already low public expenditure, declining government revenues over the short term, the impacts of climate events (e.g., the recent severe flooding) and COVID-19 all pose severe risks to the Republic of the Congo's most vulnerable citizens, which to date the state has responded to inadequately. Minimal specific information is available concerning the Republic of the Congo's response to COVID-19. Though the president announced a XAF 100 billion (\$182.8 million) fund for businesses and vulnerable people in March 2020, XAF 4 billion (\$7.3 million) of relief for poor households and individuals, and free water and electricity during the confinement period, there is limited information available concerning the implementation of measures taken to aid vulnerable populations.

Though some progress has been made, equality of opportunity remains largely nonexistent in the Republic of the Congo, particularly in terms of employment, education and public office. Women comprise 49.1% of non-agriculture employment, hold only 13% of the seats in the National Assembly and represent only 20.8% of graduates from tertiary education STEM programs. The female to male unemployment ratio is 1.14. The most recent data (2018) indicates an adult (age 15+) female literacy rate of 74.6%, compared to an adult male literacy rate of 86.1%. Female literacy has improved slightly over previous review periods. The ratio of female to male enrollment in education stood at 1.1 in primary, 0.9 in secondary and 0.7 in tertiary education.

### Social safety nets



### Equal opportunity



Discrimination against ethnic minorities is not uncommon, particularly against some foreign Africans and against indigenous (Pygmy) populations. Indigenous (Pygmy) populations have limited access to education and employment and are frequent targets of violence or forced labor. Steps were taken in July 2019 (Decree No. 2019-202) to improve access to health care and preserve their pharmacopeia for indigenous (Pygmy) peoples, though the effectiveness of these steps remains to be seen. Ethnic favoritism continues to dominate Congolese politics and domestic cleavages, with Sassou Nguesso increasingly promoting ethnoregional allies from his home region of Cuvette to positions of power while marginalizing southern and indigenous populations.

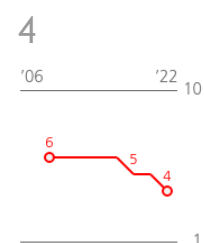
## 11 | Economic Performance

The Republic of the Congo was able to overcome economic crises surrounding its 1997–1999 civil war and the 2008 global financial crisis through increased oil production and aid from international donors. The current period, however, has not witnessed the same increase in production, despite increases in 2017 and 2018, 2019 and 2020 witnessed a precipitous slowing of oil production, with production falling below 300 barrels per day for most of 2020. Likewise, the recovery in global oil prices between 2016 and 2018 did not last long, with 2020 witnessing global prices as low as \$19.12 per barrel in April as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The latter is the most severe impact of the pandemic, with other impacts almost certainly weaker, although its extent remains difficult to assess. In general, fluctuations in oil prices and production remain the most significant driver of the Republic of the Congo's economic performance.

The GDP per capita growth rate was -3.4% in 2019 and -8.6% in 2020 but was projected by the government to recover to 0.5% in 2021. GDP per capita in 2019 was \$3,435 (PPP), down from \$3,495 (PPP) in 2018. GDP was \$10,820.6 million (PPP) in 2019. Unemployment was 9.3% in 2020, which marked a slight improvement over previous years. Public debt was 83.7% of GDP in 2019 and increased to 104.5% of GDP in 2020, largely driven by further aid from the IMF and continued loans from China following a 2019 restructuring. The Republic of the Congo has had a World Bank CPIA debt policy rating of two since 2017 and is considered to be in severe distress.

The Republic of the Congo's current account balance was 3.5% of GDP in 2019 and -5.7% in 2020 but was projected to recover slightly in 2021. Central government net lending/borrowing was 5.8% of GDP in 2019 and -2.1% in 2020. Recession in non-oil sectors continued, with non-oil sectors contracting by 5.5% due to weaker activity in construction, public works, transport and telecommunications. Trade amounted to 122.25% of GDP in 2019.

Output strength





Inflation is estimated at 2.2% in 2019, up from 1.2% in 2018 and 0.45% in 2017. Foreign direct investment stood at 31.1% of GDP in 2019 down from 37.0% in 2018 and 48.9% in 2017. Tax revenue amounted to 9.0% of GDP in 2018, down from 13.8% in 2017. Gross capital formation was 18.8% of GDP in 2019, also down on previous years. The Republic of the Congo consistently operated on budget deficits through 2017, but 2018 and 2019 saw surpluses of 6.8% and 8.8% respectively, though this is expected to have changed in 2020 and 2021.

Net official development assistance received was 1.4% of GNI and private capital flows were 12.3% of GDP. Overall, economic prospects for the Republic of the Congo in the short term are not optimistic. Extreme poverty, especially in rural areas, appears to have increased since 2016 as oil prices and production have fallen. Less than 4.9% of the poorest 65% of Congolese have access to social protection programs. Non-extractive sectors are expected to contract or stagnate, while the Republic of the Congo's debt, especially to China, is expected to continue to increase and revenues from oil are expected to continue to decline from 2021. In the absence of genuine economic diversification, the Republic of the Congo will remain dependent on a weakening oil sector and an untenable debt burden.

## 12 | Sustainability

Forests cover more than half of the Republic of the Congo's territory. Between 1990 and 2015, total forested area decreased by only about 1.7%, despite the timber industry remaining a crucial industry behind the oil sector. Carbon dioxide emissions remain around 0.6 tons per capita, unchanged from the previous review period. Renewable energies, particularly hydropower, account for roughly 60% of energy consumption, compared to 40% for fossil fuels. Due to the state-run nature of the country's utilities, this can be interpreted as a result of government policy.

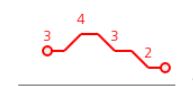
Nevertheless, pollution, soil erosion and changes in climate continue to pose significant concerns. Specifically, the lack of regulation over the country's mining, timber and oil industries risks significant long-term degradation to the Congo's environment. Increased flooding in parts of the country, likewise, risks further soil degradation, groundwater contamination and human displacement. Despite superficial commitments to environmental sustainability (including the establishment of a "green" climate fund in August 2019), the Sassou Nguesso regime remains primarily concerned with remaining in power and sustaining the immense wealth gained from the country's extractive industries.

The Republic of the Congo's most recent Red List Index score was 0.984, indicating that a significant majority of the country's species are not at risk of extinction. According to the most recent (2015) U.N. data, 119 species were threatened with extinction, an increase of 10 over 2013. The country's most noteworthy moves have involved international agreements and projects that aim to

Environmental  
policy

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'06 '22 10



preserve the country's forests, particularly the 2015 Paris Agreement, 2018 Brazzaville Declaration and the controversial Messok-Dja protected area. France committed \$65 million in September 2020 to the preservation of the Congo's rainforest. These efforts have had mixed results but demonstrate a willingness to cooperate with external partners including the United Nations, the WWF, France and the DRC to preserve its vital forests and the world's largest tropical peatlands. Overall, the Republic of the Congo ranked 152 out of 180 countries in the 2020 Environmental Performance Index, scoring 30.8. Its score has decreased by 1.5 over the past decade. The Republic of the Congo performed particularly poorly in air quality (rank 167), sanitation and drinking water (rank 152), grassland loss (160), and growth in CO<sub>2</sub>, SO<sub>2</sub> and NO<sub>x</sub> emissions (ranks 164, 176 and 176, respectively). The Republic of the Congo's poor performance in these areas demonstrates the ineffectiveness of largely superficial government measures, which have done little to address the poor infrastructure, minimal regulation and inadequate administration that limit the Republic of the Congo's pursuit of genuine environmental sustainability.

As in previous review periods, education and R&D institutions and expenditures remain negligible, with most facilities confined to the major urban centers of Brazzaville and Pointe Noire. Though there have been some improvements in rural areas, these have been slow and limited. Government expenditure on education was 3.5% of GDP in 2018 (most recent data), down from 5.5% in 2017.

The U.N. Education Index score for the Republic of the Congo was 0.543 in 2019, a slight increase over previous years. Gross enrollment rates in 2012 (most recent data) were 104% for primary, 52% for secondary and 9% for tertiary, with a primary completion rate of 71.6% and lower secondary completion rate of 50.1% in the same year. These figures align with the most recent (2013) U.N. data, which indicates that the primary school dropout rate is 29.7%.

The adult literacy rate was 80.3% in 2018, with a male adult literacy rate of 86.1% and a female adult literacy rate of 74.6%. Illiteracy remains a concern among rural and elderly populations. The quality and focus of education and training is largely conditioned by the country's economic and political climate. In times of economic crisis, education is among the areas to suffer under austerity measures, particularly in rural areas. Curricula are often designed in the interests of the regime, whether through promoting certain ideologies or through more general propaganda.

As in previous reviews, R&D efforts remain minimal at best, with no data available on government expenditure in this regard. Infrastructural or technological improvements can at times serve as important proxies for improvements in this area. However, with only 8.65% of the population using the internet in 2019, these improvements have likewise been minimal. Indeed, this figure is unchanged from 2017 and 2018. As such, it is evident that the Republic of the Congo under the Sassou Nguesso regime has yet to prioritize improvements in education, R&D or the necessary infrastructure to aid in these developments.

Education policy /  
R&D

2

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2 1

## Governance

### I. Level of Difficulty

As in previous review periods, the Republic of the Congo's economic and political activities are largely dependent on its oil sector. Declining oil production in recent years, and lower oil prices prior to and as a result of COVID-19 have significantly impacted government revenues and debt. Otherwise, the impact of the pandemic seems low. As of January 30, 2021, the government had confirmed only 7,887 total cases (1,024 active infections and 5,846 recovered cases) and merely 117 deaths, although it remains unknown whether this is due to a lower impact, a more resilient population or a combination thereof.

Due to the country's dependence on oil and the regime's emphasis on maintaining the corrupt networks that surround this key sector, short-term prospects for economic performance and service delivery are negative.

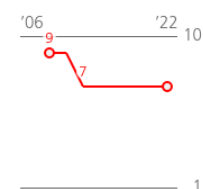
The Republic of the Congo has been in good standing with the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) since 2019 and is categorized as making meaningful progress toward improved transparency in its extractive industries. However, there is credible evidence that the Sassou Nguesso government has secured favorable EITI reports by bribing EITI personnel, including the country director. High-profile corruption continues to plague the oil industry and state-run SNPC. Due to its dependence on oil, non-oil and especially non-extractive sectors remain relatively uninfluential on economic functions. Non-oil sectors contracted by 5.5%. Though 2018 and 2019 witnessed surpluses due to a brief recovery in oil prices, this was short-lived and the Republic of the Congo is expected to return to a deficit in 2020.

The government's failure to invest in economic diversification has constrained the domestic business environment and subjected the country to the volatility inherent to a dependence on global oil markets. Mass poverty, ethnoregional cleavages, poor service delivery, poor infrastructure and a weak civil society continue to limit the Republic of the Congo's prospects. Increasing indebtedness to China, severe flooding and other climate events, and significant limitations on economic functions due to COVID-19 pose further obstacles to progress in the Republic of the Congo.

Though oil prices are expected to recover in the short to medium term, declining production will likely limit the benefits to be derived from higher prices. In the absence of diversification away from oil, the Republic of the Congo will remain

Structural  
constraints

7



vulnerable to externalities in oil markets, and dependent upon aid from actors including the IMF and China. Furthermore, the country is dependent on imports of basic commodities (e.g., food), which further constrains the country's self-sufficiency and development. Though the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has cooled, there remains a risk of post-electoral violence in the Central African Republic, which may pose a challenge in the form of population displacement and spillover effects.

As in previous review periods, the operation and effectiveness of civil society in the Republic of the Congo is limited by endemic corruption and the repressive nature of the regime. Numerous civil society organizations (CSOs) operate in the country, many under the umbrella of PCPA Congo, which serves to engage CSOs, state actors, French interests and NGOs. The country has in recent years been accused (e.g., by the Congolese Observatory for Human Rights (OCDH), Transparency International and Amnesty International) of intimidating, arbitrarily imprisoning and torturing activists, civil society leaders and journalists.

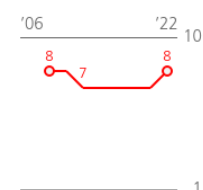
A Brazzaville-based group dedicated to advocating for prisoners' rights was reportedly robbed in March 2019 as part of a government intimidation campaign. The head of the Congolese Observatory for Human Rights (OCDH) was barred from leaving the country to attend a conference in Kenya in May 2019. Events such as these prompted Freedom House to reduce the Republic of the Congo's score for NGO freedoms from two to one in its Freedom in the World 2020 report.

The government has repeatedly restricted communication services (e.g., phone and internet services) during elections or other periods of potential upheaval, with the aim of limiting the ability of the opposition to coordinate. Abuses of indigenous (Pygmy) populations have been largely ignored, despite investigations by groups including the UNDP. Fears of government reprisals remain prominent, particularly among the population impacted by the 2016–2018 Pool conflict, indigenous (Pygmy) populations and populations impacted by the severe flooding in the north of the country. Furthermore, one person died while being held in police custody for challenging the government's COVID-19 policies. Journalists who are critical of the regime have frequently been punished.

Given the nature of the Republic of the Congo's ethnoregional cleavages, many CSOs are organized along these lines and are thus largely localized in their focus. Village-level organizations, which once played an important role in societal functions, have a negligible impact beyond the local level. In all, the function of civil society in the Republic of the Congo is constrained by a dependence on and fear of the regime, which inherently limits the degree to which government actions can be questioned or non-elite social issues can be raised.

Civil society traditions

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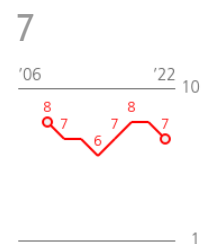


Though cleavages have cooled slightly since the previous review period, ethnic, regional and social conflicts remain common in the Republic of the Congo. The country's north-south divide remains a source of frequent political conflicts, which have a tendency to become violent, particularly during election cycles. This has been a consistent pattern throughout the Republic of the Congo's history of independence and particularly under Sassou Nguesso's regime, which primarily elevates ethnoregional loyalists. These domestic cleavages have been present in recent decades, including the 1997–1999 civil war in which Sassou Nguesso regained power and the 2016–2018 crackdown on the Pool region. The conflict in Pool displaced around 138,000 people, many of whom have yet to receive sufficient government aid. Credible accusations persist of ethnic targeting, torture and other human rights abuses by the government, its allies and other local militias.

Though the current review period represents a relative calming of conflicts, politics in the Republic of the Congo remain divided largely along ethnoregional lines. This is particularly the case concerning the ruling PCT, and its key competitors MCDDI and UPADS. Two of Sassou Nguesso's leading competitors for the 2016 presidential elections have since been sentenced to 20 years in prison. These instances as well as repeated conflicts in the Pool region represent a pattern under Sassou Nguesso of silencing opposition and, in particular, suppressing the influence of peoples from the southern regions. In some instances, the government has employed significant force to suppress protests related to COVID-19, particularly in the aftermath of the death of a young woman who was being held in custody by the gendarmerie. However, these instances have not resulted in significant outbreaks of violence.

Though such instances have been rare recently, foreigners and particularly other Africans have in the past been employed as scapegoats for domestic economic woes in order to redirect growing public resentment in key urban areas. In recent years, refugees from neighboring countries including the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic have not been met with any noted hostilities, though it has been noted that refugees from the Central African Republic have at times been the targets of anti-Muslim rhetoric. The continued risk of conflict in both the Democratic Republic of the Congo and, more immediately, the Central African Republic pose some risk of incursions by foreign militias along key border enclaves, though this risk is unlikely to be high.

Conflict intensity



## II. Governance Performance

### 14 | Steering Capability

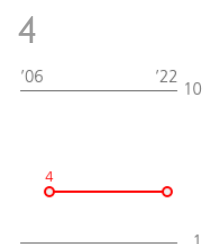
The regime maintains a position of supremacy in the Republic of the Congo's most important economic sectors, utilities and political systems, which allows the regime to freely formulate and implement key priorities while suppressing opposition. Declining oil production and suppressed revenues due to lower prices since 2019 have not led to significant efforts to diversify the country's economy, however. The Republic of the Congo's non-oil sectors continue to contract and remain weak. Despite recommendations from the IMF, World Bank and other external actors, the regime has failed to drive economic diversification due to the continued profit the regime derives from the clientelist networks that surround the country's resources.

Pressure from external actors has prompted rhetorical commitments from the government to improve transparency, openness and diversification. However, real progress in this regard has been limited at best. Pressure from CSOs is largely channeled through the IMF. However, as yet, this pressure has yielded limited results in tackling corruption and the lack of transparency in key sectors in the country. Economic performance is likely to be further constrained in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, with government responses to date limited to short-term mitigation and relief efforts, rather than the establishment of systematic adjustment mechanisms. Furthermore, the country's strategic capacity in this regard is limited and responses have largely failed to promote short- to medium-term prospects. Government projections of positive economic growth in 2021 are likely to be undermined by the country's lack of crisis management preparation.

Infrastructure and other development projects remain largely centered on the major urban centers of Brazzaville and Pointe Noire, with access to basic services and telecommunications limited in rural areas. Though the country is highly urbanized, significant populations in rural areas remain at risk due to a lack of mitigation efforts to offset the effects of climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and population displacement. Infrastructure projects are rarely more than symbolic and often do not benefit non-extractive sectors or the wider population beyond key elites. As in previous reviews, the government's strategic aims are not commensurate with the country's real problems and often prioritize short- to medium-term benefits over the broader social, economic, political, environmental or security needs of the populace.

Question  
Score

Prioritization



Though the regime continues to rhetorically commit to diversification, socioeconomic development and ecological sustainability, these ambitions are largely subordinated to the interests of the oil and other extractive industries. During times of economic boom, revenues rarely benefit the wider population to any significant extent. During times of recession or high debt, as in the current review period, IMF pressure has contributed to the implementation of austerity policies, with government expenditures typically cut in areas crucial to the wider population. As a result, the government has failed to tackle the broader issues that constrain progress in the Republic of the Congo.

A drop in government revenue due to declining oil production and prices, and the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to further constrain the government's ability to perform its core functions and contribute to rising public debt. Times of decreased government revenue or economic crises have frequently prompted cuts in social services, health care, education and other key policy areas. Government investment in non-extractive sectors is likely to decline in the short term, while borrowing is likely to expand and the business protection measures implemented in March 2020 unlikely to reach the majority of the population employed in informal sectors. Environmental protection, including the 2019-established green climate fund, are likely to receive minimal attention as the country adjusts to the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

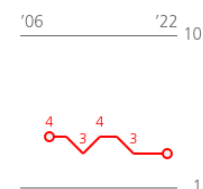
Efforts to improve transparency, tackle corruption and engage civil society are frequently undermined by the regime and the embedded clientelist network surrounding Denis Sassou Nguesso. Many of the government's policies appear to prioritize vested elite interests at the expense of the broader development of the country. Non-oil sectors remain in recession, despite the noted struggles in the Republic of the Congo's oil sector, indicating the regime's hesitance to abandon its corrupt dependence on this singular resource in favor of economic diversification, transparency and sustainable development.

Pro-cyclical fiscal and spending policies continue to undermine the Republic of the Congo's stability and ability to respond to economic volatility. The Republic of the Congo's dependence on oil subjects the country to frequent periods of contraction and indebtedness, including during the current review period. During these periods, public spending is typically cut to counterbalance declining revenues, further constraining the government's ability to learn from previous policy errors. Times of increased revenue (e.g., the previous review period) are not typically accompanied by significant benefits for the population. An unsustainable fiscal strategy and persistent indebtedness has weakened the legitimacy of the regime, and the capacity of the state to pursue economic diversification and sustainable development. The Republic of the Congo received an IMF bailout and restructured its debt with China in 2019, but low oil revenues make further aid and loans a likely priority.

Rather than address cycles of volatility and indebtedness by promoting economic diversification, transparency and sustainable development, the regime continues to prioritize investment in extractive sectors, and the maintenance of short- and

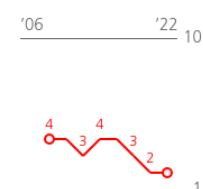
### Implementation

3



### Policy learning

2



medium-term rents. IMF and CSO pressure has in the past led to some government attempts to improve performance, but actual progress in this direction has been minimal during the current review period. There has been no indication of a significant change in the government's approach in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant economic crisis.

Services provided by the government outside of key urban centers remain minimal and violent crackdowns on opposition remain the norm under the Sassou Nguesso regime. What few development projects have been implemented have been limited in their impact and largely targeted at areas that benefit the country's elites. Most humanitarian aid provided to at-risk communities is provided by non-state and international actors. As has been the case in previous review periods, the regime has shown little sign of learning from its economic and political experiences, despite mounting domestic and international pressure.

## 15 | Resource Efficiency

The Republic of the Congo's government continues to use resources inefficiently, with high-level corruption in extractive sectors (especially oil), minimal reinvestment or diversification, and significant indebtedness to external creditors (especially China). Oil revenues and external loans are rarely used to promote developmental goals or to meet the socioeconomic needs of the population. The president's son and daughter were accused in 2019 of siphoning off significant funds from state coffers, particularly through the state-run SNPC oil company, and were placed under foreign investigation.

Minimal accountability for such high-level corruption and an emphasis on maintaining entrenched clientelist networks has contributed to a bloated cabinet, and an inefficient and ineffective bureaucracy. Politically motivated turnover in high-level positions is not uncommon. The poor quality of the education system and low training standards limit the population's ability to hold the government accountable and contribute to a lack of transparency. The government's response to COVID-19 has largely been to maintain course, relying on external aid and loans to address impending revenue shortfalls. The government has demonstrated a general reluctance to reinvest in or expand the country's human, financial or organizational resources, relegating the country to relative stagnation and vulnerability. In the short term, declining oil revenues are likely to exacerbate many of these challenges.

Efficient use of assets

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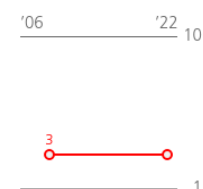
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Though centralization remains a key characteristic of the Republic of the Congo's personalistic state, competition among elites and other clients of Sassou Nguesso inherently limits intra-governmental coordination and undermines the overall coherence of state policy. The importance of SOEs and vested corporate and political interests continue to impact the regime's policy decisions and priorities, limiting progress toward diversification or other key objectives which require coherent and effective governance. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, government efforts have been limited and haphazard, with local actors proving more influential in some areas than the authoritative approach of the government.

Policy coordination

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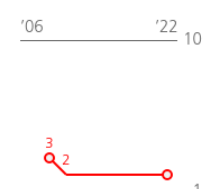


Pressure from the IMF, World Bank and CSOs has in the past stoked rhetorical shifts among the regime, but actual government policy remains limited by its lack of transparency and prioritization of the clientelism surrounding the Congo's extractive industries. Public works and infrastructural improvements remain limited and concentrated in major urban centers without benefiting a large portion of the population. Indebtedness to foreign actors, dependence on declining oil revenues, and a general reluctance to pursue economic diversification or development continue to pose significant obstacles to the government's ability to coherently execute its stated objectives.

As has been widely discussed in this and previous reports, corruption is rife in the Republic of the Congo and has been central to the maintenance of Denis Sassou Nguesso's neo-patrimonial regime. The highest-profile recent examples have been the accusations against the president's son and daughter since 2019, which have led to an investigation into the former by U.S. authorities. The amount of revenue siphoned from the country's oil sector by the ruling elite is immeasurable. NGOs (e.g., the Berne Declaration, Global Witness, OCDH and the Congolese Catholic Church) continue to decry the high level of corruption in the country, but no real progress has been made to address this key issue.

Anti-corruption policy

2



The regime has at times rhetorically committed to tackling corruption and improving transparency. However, the rare instances where corruption is punished typically involve scapegoating low-level officials rather than combatting elite-level corruption, which impacts the functioning and prospects of the country more significantly. The Republic of the Congo is party to both the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), and has been deemed by the latter to be making progress. The country has, however, frequently run afoul of these groups' standards in times of high revenue. The CEMAC, IMF and World Bank offer further guidance and oversight, but the real impact of any of these groups on the Republic of the Congo's actions remains minimal.

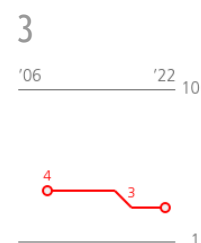
Declining oil revenues, higher external debt and increased suppression of dissent offer little cause for optimism regarding the willingness of the government to adopt effective mechanisms to combat corruption and the country's dependence on oil. The money-laundering scheme surrounding the country's oil sector is designed to obscure the level of corruption from external observers. Two government offices, the CNLCCF and OAC, exist to combat corruption and fraud, but these have had no real impact on corruption in the Republic of the Congo under Sassou Nguesso.

## 16 | Consensus-Building

Though the regime maintains a rhetorical commitment to expanding multiparty democracy and strengthening the effective balance of power, no real progress has been made in this direction in recent years. Elections, such as in 2016 and 2017, are typically marred by violent clashes between protesters and government forces, as popular demands for more equitable systems are met by government suppression. The personalized nature of rule under Sassou Nguesso continues to ensure that the government's key priority is the survival of the regime. Given Sassou Nguesso and the PCT's historical support for single-party rule, their continued dominance of the Republic of the Congo's political system ensures genuine representation is minimal at best. A referendum in 2015 eliminated presidential term and age limits and ensured Sassou Nguesso cannot be tried for crimes committed while in office. Two of his key competitors in the 2016 presidential election have since been sentenced to 20 years imprisonment each. Sassou Nguesso will run for re-election in March 2021, but this is unlikely to serve any other purpose other than to reinforce the regime's mandate.

Despite its struggling oil market, the Republic of the Congo continues to fail to adopt a true market economy or diversify its domestic markets. Despite IMF-induced austerity measures, which are likely to expand in the short term as the country faces yet another debt crisis, the country's economy remains dominated by its extractive sectors (especially oil) as its non-oil sectors continue to contract. Investment in oil and other extractive sectors is substantial, but the benefits of this investment rarely benefit the wider economy or population. Domestic entrepreneurship is largely limited to the informal sectors, with foreign capital and monopolistic SOEs dominating key formal sectors. Given high oil production and large oil revenues until recently, the Republic of the Congo has had little incentive to open its economy or invest in other key areas, though declining oil rents could potentially alter this in the medium term. Opposition and civil society figures continue to call for a more open and diversified economy, but the real power of these actors is limited as any real change is likely to come from within the regime.

Consensus on goals



Pressure from the IMF and other external actors has at times prompted movement toward a market economy, but progress is frequently undermined by the government's reluctance to promote genuine economic diversification or greater transparency in its economic activities.

The Republic of the Congo under Sassou Nguesso remains highly personalized and autocratic in nature. Given the clientelism and dependency prevalent among the country's elites, the majority of power remains vested in anti-democratic actors. The 2015 referendum served to extend Sassou Nguesso's rule, while the subsequent 2016 and 2017 elections reinforced Sassou Nguesso and the PCT's control over the country. Opposition figures are frequently harassed, imprisoned and tortured, with the most prominent examples being the sentencing to hard labor of two of Sassou Nguesso's chief rivals for the presidency. Activists and journalists critical of the regime are likewise subject to intimidation and violence. In 2019, a leading academic and activist died reportedly as a result of injuries sustained while in government custody. In 2020, a journalist from the state-run news broadcast agency was suspended following critical coverage of the government's COVID-19 response.

Reformers and protesters critical of or unwilling to cooperate with the regime frequently face violent reprisals. For example, in 2020, the government responded with force to protests over the death of a young woman in gendarmerie custody. The now-cooled conflict in the Pool region in the aftermath of the 2016 elections serves as another prominent example. The regime's continued emphasis on maintaining Sassou Nguesso's unchallenged rule has undermined efforts toward democratization, diversification and development, and poses a significant challenge to human rights in the Republic of the Congo. With Sassou Nguesso virtually certain to claim re-election in 2021, all of these patterns are expected to continue in the short term.

Ethnic and regional cleavages remain potent sources for political and violent conflict in the Republic of the Congo, with Sassou Nguesso typically elevating ethnoregional loyalists from the northern Cuvette region above the interests of those in the more populous south. The military is primarily comprised of ethnic Mbochi, which is Sassou Nguesso's ethnic group. Ethnic Lari and Kongo in the south, particularly in the Pool region, remain vulnerable to government crackdowns, which could potentially reignite tensions and conflict. As in previous review periods, Sassou Nguesso frequently elevates individuals from his home Cuvette region to key ministerial and military positions, limiting the degree to which genuine integration and reconciliation can occur.

Political parties in the Republic of the Congo are likewise largely distributed along ethnoregional lines. For example, Sassou Nguesso's ruling PCT primarily draws support from the northern regions; UPADS, represented in the 2016 election by Pascal Tsaty Mabiala, primarily represents the southern Nibolek (Niari, Bouenza,

Anti-democratic  
actors

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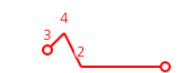


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Cleavage /  
conflict  
management

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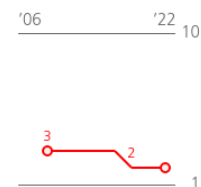
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Lekoumou) regions; and Brazzaville and the surrounding Pool region largely supported Guy Brice Parfait Kolélas and the MCDDI, though Kolélas and the party his father founded have since parted ways. These three groupings thus serve as key identifiers and sources of domestic cleavage, particularly along a north-south divide. Sassou Nguesso’s continued domination and northern favoritism only exacerbates the position of southern peoples in Congolese society and frequently serves as a source of conflict between local militias and government forces. Due to the persistence and historical nature of the Republic of the Congo’s ethnoregional cleavages, there remains a distinct militarized element to politics, despite the long-standing reign of the current president.

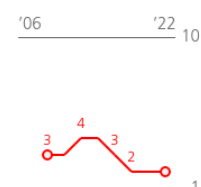
The government of the Republic of the Congo under Denis Sassou Nguesso is notorious for ignoring, suppressing and intimidating civil society actors. Its rhetoric frequently suggests otherwise, but civil society organizations remain highly localized and largely operate through the IMF as an intermediary to the government. Irrespective, the arrest and torture of figures critical of the regime from civil society, journalism and politics indicates the degree to which the regime is reluctant to engage with civil society on any significant scale that might threaten its vested interests. Though groups like the Congolese Observatory for Human Rights (OCDH) do important and courageous work in making government abuses public and providing critical insights to the public, they face the constant threat of state repression.

The Republic of the Congo, unlike many war-torn countries including many of its neighbors, never formed a truth and reconciliation commission in the aftermath of its 1997–1999 civil war nor in the aftermath of the 2016–2018 Pool conflict. Though a cease-fire was agreed in 2017 and disarmament in 2018, no substantial efforts to address underlying injustices or sources of tension have been made. The government’s failure to address deeply entrenched ethnoregional cleavages has perpetuated a pattern of northern favoritism and southern repression, primarily serving the vested interests of northern elites in Sassou Nguesso’s inner circle. This has in the past served as a potent source of tension and conflict, particularly during election cycles, leaving the impending March 2021 presidential elections as a potential hotbed for further clashes.

Civil society participation  
2



Reconciliation  
2



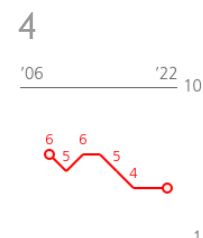
## 17 | International Cooperation

The Republic of the Congo has a long history of cooperation with and reliance on international lenders like the IMF and World Bank, including in the current review period. Policy prescriptions from such groups are frequently ignored or undermined, however, and routine lending is not accompanied by efforts toward diversification or greater international cooperation. Generally, the government lacks a long-term development strategy that comes close to aspiring to an inclusive market economy or democratic system. China has emerged as the country's most significant external creditor, though the United States, France and the European Union maintain significant interests in the country. The benefits from investments from these countries are frequently limited to non-labor-intensive sectors and the governing elites. Non-extractive sectors have been in recession throughout the review period and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to drive extractive industries, or at least oil, into recession, which significantly limit government revenues and likely require further international assistance. The IMF, European Union, World Food Programme, United Nations and France have provided aid to the Republic of the Congo to support its efforts to respond to COVID-19. The Bank of Central African States (BEAC) and the Banking Commission of Central Africa (COBAC) have provided further financial assistance and the government has adopted some tax easing mechanisms. However, as of January 2021, government cooperation with international actors in responding to COVID-19 and the impending financial crisis has been inadequate.

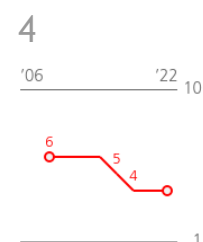
The Republic of the Congo under Sassou Nguesso has long sought to present itself as a reliable and credible partner to international partners like the United Nations, African Union, IMF and European Union, but has frequently failed to live up to its commitments and has been subject to criticism from each of these groups during the review period. The government has forged strong connections with other autocratic regimes in the region and China has emerged as its most significant state partner over the past decade. Historically, the United States, France and Germany have held significant interests in the Republic of the Congo, but these relationships have been shaken somewhat by persistent high-level corruption and the government's violent responses in the Pool region.

The Republic of the Congo has maintained consistent dialogue with the IMF and World Bank in the current review period as the country's debt level has become untenable, and significant declines in oil revenues have hurt economic growth projections and government revenues. Despite attempts to portray itself as a reliable partner and willing reformer, the Republic of the Congo has made limited progress in this regard and has demonstrated limited capacity to respond to crises such as COVID-19. In December 2020, Moody's affirmed a Caa2 credit rating for the Republic of the Congo, due largely to its weak economy and poor governance.

Effective use of support



Credibility



Standard & Poor's gave the Republic of the Congo a CCC+ credit rating in October 2020. These ratings are consistent with the previous review period and have remained steady during the present period, demonstrating a general lack of improvement in this regard.

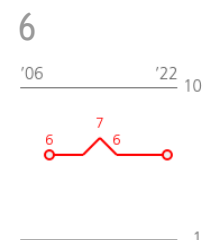
Denis Sassou Nguesso has long attempted to portray himself as the elder statesman of central Africa, including through seeking leadership roles in the African Union. He has further attempted to assert himself within regional bodies, such as the Communauté Économique et Monétaire de l'Afrique Centrale (CEMAC) and the Communauté Économique des États de l'Afrique Centrale (CEEAC). The Republic of the Congo maintains relatively strong relationships with its five neighbors (Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, Gabon and Cameroon) and tends to comply for the most part with the rules of the organizations to which it is party. Angola, another member of CEEAC, emerged as an important regional partner in the aftermath of the 1997–1999 civil war which returned Sassou Nguesso to power, having supported the president's return to power. A shared dependence on oil closely aligns the Republic of the Congo's interests with Angola and other neighbors, enabling regional cooperation and coordination. Though perhaps less than in the previous review period, South Africa remains an additional regional partner of some importance.

The Republic of the Congo's relationships with the Central African Republic (CAR) and Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have at times been complicated by the conflict endemic to each of these contexts, including along key border enclaves. Though the conflict in the neighboring Mai-Ndombe province of the DRC has cooled during the review period, renewed risk exists in the CAR. Specifically, former CAR president François Bozizé has been accused of plotting a coup in response to his ineligibility to run in the CAR's December 2020 presidential elections against the democratically elected Faustin-Archange Touadéra.

The Republic of the Congo's impending financial crisis due to its dependence on oil is shared by four other CEMAC countries (Chad, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon), and thus plausibly promotes cooperation as each is likely to seek IMF and foreign support in the short term. The Republic of the Congo's declining production is likely to further its dependence on such avenues for cooperation. Gabon and the Republic of the Congo share a particularly long history of cooperation and coordination, dating back to their status within the colony of French Equatorial Africa, and have served as important enclaves of francophone influence in central Africa. Gabon's former president, the late Omar Bongo, was married to Sassou Nguesso's daughter, though his son and Gabon's current president, Ali Bongo Ondimba, has had a more tense relationship with the Republic of the Congo's long-standing autocrat.

Cameroon, the DRC and the CAR have all served as important areas of conflict in the past, including in areas bordering the Republic of the Congo, which has at times strained relations between these countries. The Republic of the Congo has,

Regional  
cooperation



however, served as a key member of CEMAC and MINUSCA peacekeeping forces in the Central African Republic, while Sassou Nguesso at times has attempted to serve the role of mediator in regional conflicts. The Republic of the Congo is likewise party to important regional environmental agreements, particularly with the Democratic Republic of the Congo to protect the Congo Basin. The Republic of the Congo is likewise party to the Paris Agreement and has established protected forest areas in cooperation with the DRC and Gabon. Though limited in their impact, such agreements play an important role in propelling the Republic of the Congo toward greater sustainability.

## Strategic Outlook

The Republic of the Congo under Denis Sassou Nguesso remains heavily dependent on oil and characterized by a personalistic ruling style centered on entrenched corruption and clientelism. With the president at the heart of these networks and with those closest to him benefiting exorbitantly from state revenues, even times of economic boom have witnessed little benefit for the wider population. Declining oil production and global oil prices, and continued recession in the country's non-oil sectors have significantly hurt the country's economic prospects during the review period and contributed to the government's increasingly untenable indebtedness to China and other foreign creditors. Though the IMF, World Bank and civil society actors have vociferously pressured the government to pursue economic diversification and improved transparency in its extractive sectors, no real progress has been made toward a market economy.

Sassou Nguesso and his inner circle retain direct connections to key companies in the extractive industries, while much of the population remains dependent on subsistence or informal sectors. Ethnoregional favoritism, which primarily take the form of discriminatory recruitment to high-level positions and government crackdowns, continue to pose a significant humanitarian risk to large portions of the Republic of the Congo's population. The effects of climate change significantly increase the risk of population displacement and further impoverishment. Government failures to develop domestic infrastructure and implement policies that promote broad socioeconomic development ensure large portions of the population remain marginalized and exposed to the volatility inherent to a heavily indebted and resource-dependent country. Cooperation with the United Nations, IMF and other international groups has led the regime to offer some rhetorical commitments, but to date little transformational progress has been made in the Republic of the Congo.

From this basic overview, the following strategic recommendations must be pursued:

- **Improve transparency and combat corruption:** The Republic of the Congo's progress continues to be undermined by endemic corruption and a lack of transparency surrounding its extractive industries, especially oil. In the absence of greater transparency and mechanisms to combat high-level corruption in these areas, the country is likely to suffer from volatility and socioeconomic stagnation.
- **Meet the economic and social needs of the population:** Dependence on a shrinking oil sector and continued recession in non-oil sectors highlight the necessity for the Republic of the Congo to pursue economic diversification in order to improve economic opportunities and sustainability. Most of the population remains in or at risk of severe poverty, and dependent on subsistence and informal sectors. Therefore, the government must ensure the delivery of key services and economic opportunities in order to transform the Republic of the Congo.



- **Improve social engagement and representation:** The Republic of the Congo remains largely divided along ethnoregional lines, with Sassou Nguesso's northern favoritism leaving many Congolese disaffected by the government's actions. Southern communities, women and indigenous (Pygmy) populations are particularly unrepresented and subject to abuse. Failure to address societal inequities and power disparities means that much of the Republic of the Congo's population is likely to continue to suffer from government abuses, and a lack of economic opportunities and rights. Central to improving this situation will be quality education and training, without which the transition toward greater equity and opportunities will be difficult.
- **Improve government responsiveness to external and civil society actors:** Given the Republic of the Congo's massive external debt and declining revenues, the immediate term may present an opportunity for groups like the IMF and OCDH to promote necessary domestic improvements. Specifically, a lack of attention to humanitarian crises, minimal investment in infrastructure and rampant high-level corruption must be addressed in order to prepare the country for future crises.
- **Learn policy lessons and respond to the impacts of COVID-19:** As with many countries in the world, the Republic of the Congo's progress has been shaken by COVID-19 and the distinct lack of preparation to address the socioeconomic impacts of the crisis. The government has to date largely relied on external assistance and targeted responses and has also largely failed to set clear longer-term objectives as it attempts to respond to the crisis and broader economic stagnation. Though steps have been taken to reopen the economy, the country's lack of a functioning private sector and failure to learn from previous periods of low oil revenues are a cause for concern over the medium term, with the possibility that mitigation and transformation initiatives will not be implemented.