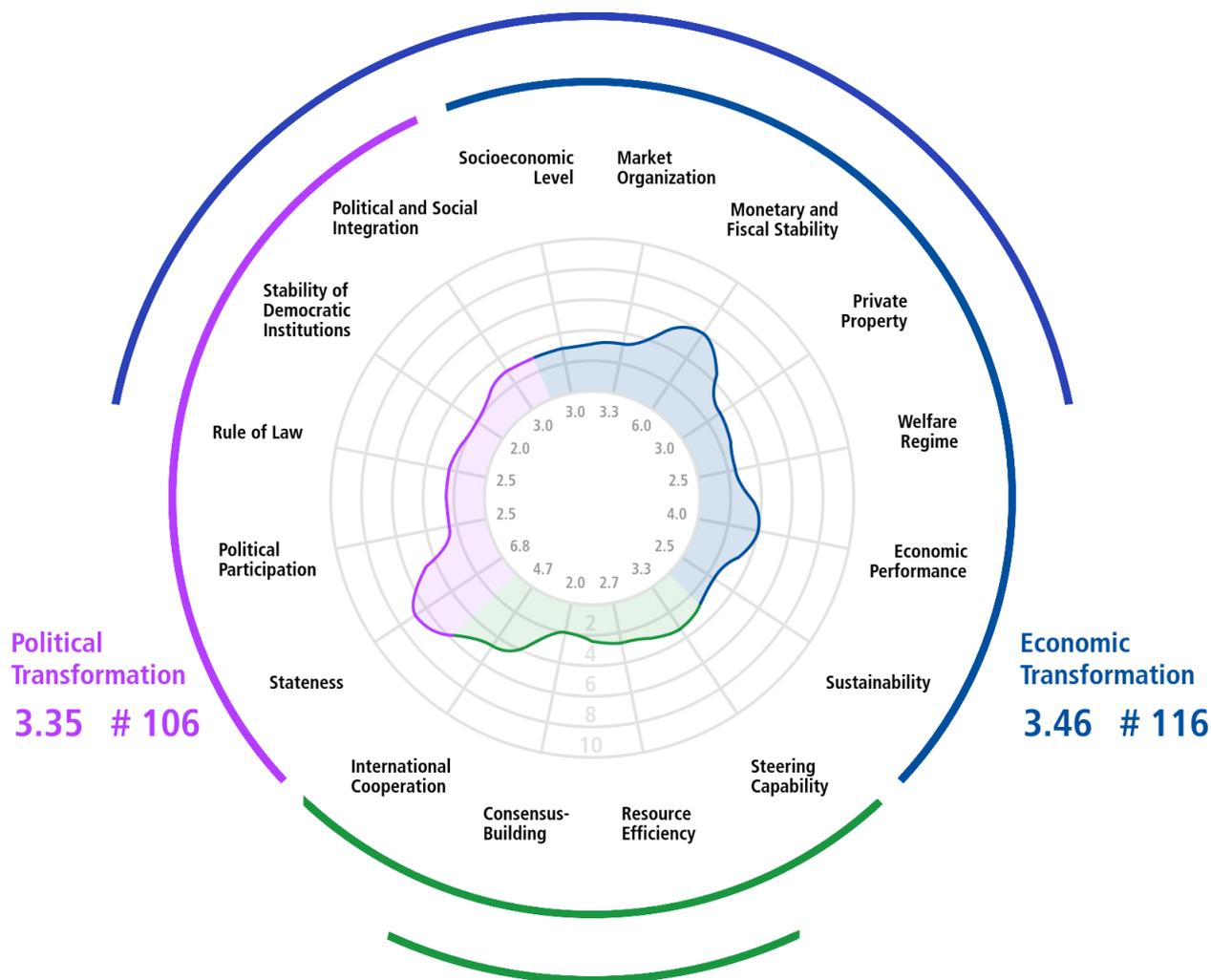


Congo, Rep.

Status Index

3.41 # 115

on 1-10 scale out of 137



Governance Index

2.91 # 117

on 1-10 scale out of 137

This report is part of the **Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2026**. It covers the period from February 1, 2023 to January 31, 2025. 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 2026 Country Report – Congo, Rep.. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026.

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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

Hauke Hartmann

Phone +49 5241 81 81389
hauke.hartmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Sebastian Plate

Phone +49 5241 81 81263
sebastian.plate@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Sabine Steinkamp

Phone +49 5241 81 81507
sabine.steinkamp@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Key Indicators

Population	M	6.3	HDI	0.649	GDP p.c., PPP \$	7026
Pop. growth ¹	% p.a.	2.4	HDI rank of 193	138	Gini Index	48.9
Life expectancy	years	65.8	UN Education Index	0.630	Poverty ³	% 59.1
Urban population	%	69.6	Gender inequality ²	0.565	Aid per capita \$	61.1

Sources (as of December 2025): The World Bank, World Development Indicators | UNDP, Human Development Report 2025. Footnotes: (1) Average annual growth rate. (2) Gender Inequality Index (GII). (3) Percentage of population living on less than \$3.65 a day at 2017 international prices.

Executive Summary

During the period under review, the Republic of the Congo exhibited no meaningful progress in political and economic transformation, as well as governance. Instead, entrenched authoritarianism, pervasive corruption and socioeconomic stagnation remained defining features of Denis Sassou Nguesso's rule.

Despite modest economic recovery in recent years, the Republic of the Congo remains heavily dependent on oil exports. During the review period, rising youth unemployment, deepening poverty, and the use of torture against political prisoners underscored the regime's reliance on repression to sustain its authority and restricting limited opportunities for social mobility and basic needs, which preserves inequality and subsistence for the majority of Congolese citizens. These dynamics further curtailed social mobility and entrenched inequality, with ethnoregional cleavages – particularly northern dominance under Sassou Nguesso – continuing to marginalize the more populous southern regions.

Sassou Nguesso and his ruling Congolese Party of Labor (PCT) have consolidated and expanded their dominance of the Republic of the Congo's political system. Sassou Nguesso's re-election in 2021, followed by sweeping legislative victories for the PCT in 2022 and 2023, entrenched the PCT's dominance across all branches of government. Constitutional amendments in 2015 abolished age and term limits, enabling Sassou Nguesso to seek re-election in 2016, 2021 and again in 2026; term limits will only be reinstated in 2031. The opposition boycotted both the 2021 presidential and 2022 parliamentary elections, while the 2023 Senate contest produced just a single opposition seat.

Denis Sassou Nguesso's regime continues to face accusations of arbitrary arrests, excessive use of force, harassment, intimidation and increased reliance on torture. Such practices remain central to its strategy of suppressing dissent and deflecting criticism over corruption and human rights abuses. Although the economy has shown moderate growth in both oil and non-oil sectors,

supported by planned expansions in energy production and a declining debt burden, the country remains in debt distress. Crucially, the limited gains from recovery have done little to improve livelihoods or meet basic needs for most citizens. While headline economic indicators show modest improvement, social conditions – including poverty, health and education – have stagnated or deteriorated.

The Republic of the Congo's domestic market economy remains constrained by a lack of diversification, while entrenched corruption, ethnoregional divisions and political repression continue to block progress toward multiparty democracy and broader representation. Epidemics and the growing effects of climate change have further strained already fragile public services. Weak regulation and oversight allow both domestic and foreign industries to pollute with impunity, contributing to soil degradation, water contamination and mounting public health risks. Overall, the country remains highly centralized and personalistic, with an authoritarian regime that prioritizes its own survival over the needs of its citizens. Although debt management and headline economic conditions have improved during the review period, these modest gains have failed to translate into better living standards. Under Denis Sassou Nguesso, the government has shown little willingness to pursue long-term development strategies or safeguard the rights of the most vulnerable.

History and Characteristics of Transformation

The Republic of the Congo's political and economic transformation began in the early 1990s, when mounting domestic unrest and international pressure forced the government of Denis Sassou Nguesso, in power since 1979, to take steps toward major political and economic change. His regime officially renounced its Marxist-Leninist ideology and, amid widespread unrest, introduced a multiparty democratic system in 1991, abolishing the single-party rule of the Congolese Party of Labor (Parti Congolais du Travail, PCT). Until then, high oil revenues had helped sustain autocratic rule and relative stability, even as the country endured a legacy of instability marked by military coups, political assassinations and ethnoregional rivalries. Persistent competition over oil revenues and entrenched regional disparities continued to drive recurrent crises despite formal political reforms.

Under these circumstances, the Republic of the Congo's transition became highly conflict-ridden, inflicting severe hardship on the population. In the 1992/93 elections, Denis Sassou Nguesso and the PCT lost power to a coalition led by Pascal Lissouba and his Union Panafricaine pour la Démocratie Sociale (UPADS). Yet the shift toward multiparty democracy did little to stabilize the country, which remained economically dependent and politically fragile. This volatility created an opening for Sassou Nguesso to reclaim power during the civil war surrounding the 1997 elections. Both sides received support from France, though Paris appeared to tilt toward Sassou Nguesso. Backed decisively by Angolan forces, he secured a return to power, setting the stage for his continued dominance.

Thereafter, ethnoregional militias waged war against the authoritarian regime, with Pool – the region surrounding Brazzaville – becoming the main theater of violence. Ultimately, the regime’s military superiority forced the militias into peace. Building on a new multiparty constitution, Sassou Nguesso and his PCT-led coalition secured victory in the 2002 elections. In 2003 and 2007, the government imposed peace agreements on the Pool militia led by Pasteur Ntoumi, a Pentecostal commander.

Since then, operating within a political system marked by entrenched corruption, Sassou Nguesso has won every election, most recently in 2021. Relying on a carrot-and-stick strategy that combined access to oil revenues with military coercion, the regime co-opted moderate opposition figures and former adversaries. The deaths of key rivals, including MCDDI leader Bernard Kolélas in 2009, further consolidated Sassou Nguesso’s position and facilitated the integration of historical opponents. In late 2013, a brief but bloody clash erupted in Brazzaville when government forces attempted to arrest Colonel Marcel Ntsourou, once a close ally of Sassou Nguesso who had turned against the regime over corruption. Ntsourou, instrumental in Sassou Nguesso’s 1997 return to power, had been scapegoated – without evidence – for a 2012 arms depot explosion that killed at least 300 people. As Sassou Nguesso’s second and constitutionally final term approached its end, it became evident he would push for constitutional revision, prompting several allies to defect to the opposition.

In 2015, Sassou Nguesso pushed through constitutional changes in a referendum widely regarded as fraudulent. The amendments abolished presidential term and age limits and granted the president immunity from domestic prosecution for crimes committed in office. Despite mass protests and heavy-handed repression, Sassou Nguesso claimed victory with 60% of the vote in the March 2016 presidential election, facing five challengers, several of whom were later arrested. He extended his rule again in March 2021, securing 88% of the vote in an election boycotted by opposition parties. His main rival, Guy Brice Parfait Kolélas, died from COVID-19 the day after the vote. Beyond the presidency, the PCT consolidated its dominance with sweeping legislative victories in 2022, leaving Sassou Nguesso’s grip on power virtually unchecked despite persistent opposition to his contested mandates.

In April 2016, the government launched a military campaign ostensibly targeting remnants of the disbanded Ninja militia led by Pasteur Ntoumi. In practice, the offensive focused heavily on the ethnic Lari community, serving as a warning against future political opposition. A state of emergency was declared, accompanied by internet and SMS blackouts. NGOs were largely denied access, leaving the true casualty count unknown, though estimates suggest thousands were killed. What is certain is the displacement of 138,000 people and the widespread destruction of homes and villages, creating a severe humanitarian crisis. Although hostilities officially ended in 2018, the region has yet to recover. Opposition figures, activists and critical journalists continue to face reprisals through arrest, torture and censorship.

With the political system still controlled by the Sassou Nguesso regime, the country’s oil-dependent economy has remained unable to shift from a highly state-interventionist model to a more market-oriented economy because of the influence of powerful state elites and the conflicts noted above. Following the defeat of the Pool militia in 2003, the government reluctantly aligned

its policies with IMF requirements through two mid-term loan agreements in 2004 and 2008, seeking economic stabilization. Substantial debt relief in 2010, achieved with IMF and World Bank backing, provided temporary respite. However, after the 2008 loan program expired in 2011, buoyed by high oil revenues between 2010 and 2014 and new Chinese loans, the government opted not to pursue further formal IMF support.

Beginning in mid-2014, the Republic of the Congo's economy came under severe strain as global oil prices and demand collapsed, triggering a sharp decline in exports and state revenues. The downturn underscored the urgent need for diversification and pushed the country, along with other Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) members, to seek renewed IMF support. A temporary recovery in revenues during 2017–2018 offered some relief, but falling production and revenues through 2019 and 2020 forced the government to request additional IMF assistance and pursue debt restructuring with China, its largest creditor. While modest progress has been made in managing debt, the shift toward a socially and environmentally sustainable market economy has been slow. Persistent poverty, rising youth unemployment and weak diversification continue to threaten both political stability and economic 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

The Republic of the Congo government generally maintains a monopoly on the use of force within its territory, as codified in the 2015 constitution. Although security forces are frequently criticized for arbitrary violence and broad impunity, the government's authority remains largely unchallenged. The end of the Pool region conflict in 2018 marked the most recent significant step toward resolving domestic ethnoregional tensions.

President Denis Sassou Nguesso has ruled the country for all but five years since 1979 and secured a fourth consecutive presidential term in 2021. His Congolese Labor Party (PCT) and its allies won 123 of 151 National Assembly seats in 2022 and 64 of 72 Senate seats in the 2023 legislative elections. Opposition parties denounced all these elections as fraudulent, and protests were often met with government crackdowns and restrictions on public gatherings.

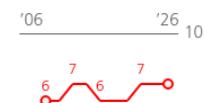
Regional security dynamics pose limited risks. Instability in the Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of the Congo continues to generate cross-border displacement, but refugees are generally integrated into local communities, albeit with increased pressure on scarce resources. In August 2023, Gabon's coup d'état, which ended the Bongo regime, raised new concerns that this key neighbor could face prolonged instability, heightening the risk of spillover violence. At present, however, none of these factors pose a serious challenge to the Republic of the Congo's internal security or the state's monopoly on force.

The main urban centers of Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire are marked by petty crime, including vehicle theft, pickpocketing and mugging. Violent crime is less common but does occur, with reports of assault, armed robbery and occasional homicides. Crime tends to be concentrated in specific neighborhoods, with risks increasing in outlying districts, particularly in the southern and northern suburbs of Brazzaville.

Question
Score

Monopoly on the
use of force

7



1

Under the 2015 constitution, all individuals born in Congo are formally guaranteed equal citizenship rights. In practice, however, significant barriers remain for certain groups in exercising those rights.

Government institutions and access to education and employment continue to be dominated by the pro-Sassou Nguesso northern Mbochi population, while southern groups, including the Kongo, face systemic discrimination and are often excluded from government posts and other opportunities. This imbalance restricts representation and political participation for a large share of the Congolese population, concentrating senior positions in the hands of those loyal to the president and further narrowing the regime's base of legitimate support.

Indigenous (Pygmy) communities remain entirely unrepresented in government, leaving their rights especially vulnerable and excluding them from meaningful input into policies affecting their lands and livelihoods. Reliable demographic data are scarce, but some reports suggest indigenous peoples may make up as much as 10% of the population, though most surveys place the figure closer to 2%. Law No. 5-2011, adopted in 2019, introduced special measures for civil registration, education and access to basic services, creating at least a formal pathway for improving conditions.

The Republic of the Congo is officially, and in practice, a secular state that bars religious dogma from interfering in political or legal affairs. The country is predominantly Christian, and most elites are Catholic, but religious leaders are generally reluctant to engage in domestic political matters. Religious interference is explicitly prohibited under the 2015 constitution.

Reliable demographic data are scarce, but roughly 90% of the population identifies as Christian, about two-thirds of whom are Catholic and the rest largely Protestant, Evangelical or Pentecostal. Between 2% and 3% of the population is Muslim, while the remaining 7% to 8% follows animist traditions. Especially in rural areas, it is common for traditional practices to be blended with Christian or Muslim beliefs.

The Republic of the Congo's basic administrative structures under Denis Sassou Nguesso remain constrained by entrenched ethnoregional favoritism, widespread corruption, weak links to rural areas and inadequate oversight of health and sanitation services, particularly in the southern districts.

In June 2023, an epidemic of shigellosis spread through the five southern districts of Niari, Pointe-Noire, Bouenza, Kouilou and Brazzaville, causing dozens of deaths. Local authorities were later criticized for poor crisis management, including insufficient medical resources. That same month, legal proceedings were launched to close a lead recycling plant in Vindoulou, Pointe-Noire, following health and environmental concerns and the absence of an impact assessment since the plant's opening in 2013. Like several of its neighbors – most prominently the Democratic Republic of the Congo – Congo has also reported an outbreak of MPOX, with 21 cases confirmed as of August 2024.

State identity

6

'06 '26 10



1

No interference of religious dogmas

10

'06 '26 10



1

Basic administration

4

'06 '26 10



1

Investment in health care and other basic administrative services has been largely concentrated in Sassou Nguesso's home region of Cuvette in the north and in the main urban centers of Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire, leaving peripheral areas with limited access to health, water and sanitation services. As seen in the Vindoulou case, corruption and poor oversight have frequently led to pollution of water sources and other harmful health impacts, further straining already weak systems.

Currently, about 74% of the population has access to at least basic water sources, but only 46% has access to clean water. Fewer than 21% have access to basic sanitation services, though more than half of the population has access to electricity. These figures have shown little change from previous review periods, with progress largely stagnant outside temporary disruptions linked to COVID-19.

2 | Political Participation

Denis Sassou Nguesso has served as president of the Republic of the Congo for all but five years since 1979 and secured his fourth consecutive term in 2021, following victories in the 2002, 2009 and 2016 elections. Like those preceding it, the 2021 presidential election drew widespread accusations of fraud, intimidation and manipulation designed to secure Sassou Nguesso's hold on power. Subsequent legislative elections in 2022 and 2023 further entrenched the dominance of the Congolese Party of Labor (PCT), which now commands overwhelming majorities in both houses. The 2015 constitution formally guarantees free and fair elections and universal suffrage, but the removal of age and term limits and consistently low turnout have ensured Sassou Nguesso and the PCT maintain a highly centralized autocratic regime, with all key ministerial, legislative and judicial posts reserved for loyalists.

Officially, Sassou Nguesso was re-elected in March 2021 with 88.4% of the vote on reported turnout of 72%. However, independent accounts suggest turnout figures were inflated, and the U.S. State Department noted observers' reports of ballot box stuffing and multiple voting by soldiers. The 2022 legislative elections, boycotted by several opposition parties over allegations of rigging, saw the PCT and its allies win 123 out of 151 National Assembly seats, while UPADS and UDH-YUKI secured seven seats each. The August 2023 Senate elections followed a similar pattern: the PCT and its allies claimed 63 out of 72 seats, with only one opposition candidate, Elisabeth Mapaha of UPADS, elected. As in previous cycles, these contests were marked by low turnout and accusations of fraud, serving primarily to reinforce the regime's authority.

The government continues to target opposition groups through arbitrary arrests, detention of political leaders and suspension of parties, particularly in the lead-up to elections. Representatives outside Sassou Nguesso's northern Mbochi base wield little influence over policymaking, while southern parties face systematic restrictions, further entrenching ethnoregional exclusion within Congo's political system.

Free and fair elections

2

'06 '26 10

3

2

1

1

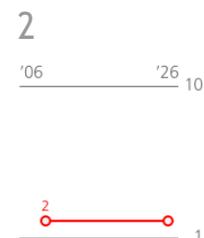
The Republic of the Congo is an autocracy under Denis Sassou Nguesso, who has ruled almost continuously since 1979. Elections are staged to create a veneer of democratic legitimacy, but in practice they offer no meaningful oversight or limits on executive authority. National policy is determined almost exclusively by Sassou Nguesso, while the legislature and judiciary are staffed with loyalists, often drawn from his Mbochi ethnic group or home region of Cuvette. This ensures the personalistic nature of the state remains intact and shields the presidency from accountability. Sassou Nguesso has only attained power through force – in 1979 and again in 1997 – and his rule has been defined by repression, corruption and violence. The president cannot be removed from office, nor can he be prosecuted for acts committed while in power. Constitutional amendments in 2015 eliminated age and term limits, guaranteeing his continued eligibility for the presidency.

Corruption is endemic, with the Sassou Nguesso family frequently implicated in the misuse of public funds. Yet anti-corruption cases are largely selective, aimed at political opponents rather than the president's inner circle. In July 2023, a coalition of Congolese NGOs filed a lawsuit widely interpreted as targeting the family, accusing it of embezzling \$25 billion in public revenues. Government operations remain opaque, with no law guaranteeing public access to official information, further insulating the regime from scrutiny. This concentration of control has allowed Sassou Nguesso to centralize all state functions under his personal authority. Military leadership remains loyal to the regime, while religious institutions and other potential sources of oversight play little role in politics and lack any meaningful capacity to check executive power.

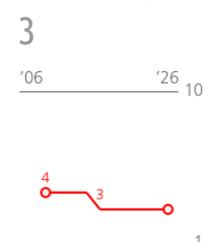
Association and assembly rights are enshrined in the 2015 constitution, but in practice the government frequently curtails them, particularly for groups critical of the regime. In March 2023 authorities banned a demonstration organized by the Mouvement Républicain to honor the late opposition leader Guy Brice Parfait Kolelas, who died during the 2021 presidential election. The prefect of Brazzaville argued that the group lacked proper party registration and accused it of threatening social cohesion and public order, prompting condemnation from domestic NGOs. Demonstrations generally require prior government approval, which is routinely denied, and protests are often dispersed by force.

Civil society organizations must register with the Interior Ministry, and those critical of the government face restrictive regulations, intimidation and the arbitrary arrest of key members. Frequent arrests in past review periods have led many groups to scale back their activities, limiting reporting on human rights abuses and moderating criticism of officials to avoid reprisals. Political parties are subject to the same registration requirements and are often denied recognition arbitrarily. Most parties are organized along ethnoregional lines, leaving little space for policy-based or ideological platforms. Oversight is absent, with the Constitutional Court that certifies election results composed entirely of Sassou Nguesso loyalists.

Effective power to govern



Association / assembly rights



The 2015 constitution also guarantees workers the right to form and join independent unions, bargain collectively and stage legal strikes. Yet these rights are often ignored, and protections for union members are inconsistently enforced. The government regularly intervenes in labor disputes through harassment and arrests of striking workers and union leaders, particularly those affiliated with the country's largest union, the Congolese Trade Union Confederation (CSC).

Freedom of expression is guaranteed under the 2015 constitution for citizens, political and civil organizations and the media, including online platforms. In practice, however, these rights are routinely ignored when they involve criticism of the regime, the president or his inner circle. The government monitors electronic communications and restricts access when politically expedient. Journalists are frequent targets of intimidation, surveillance and arrest, fostering widespread self-censorship and limiting media independence. Several domestic outlets owned by the state or its allies receive subsidies, while independent companies are often denied support.

High-profile opposition figures remain imprisoned. Former presidential candidates Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko and André Okombi Salissa were sentenced to 20 years of forced labor in 2018 and 2019, respectively, on charges of threatening state security, and both remain in detention. In March 2023 authorities banned demonstrations organized by the opposition party Mouvement Républicain, claiming the group sought to undermine social cohesion and disturb public order. Repression has intensified in recent years. A 2024 report by the Centre d'Actions pour le Développement documented a sharp increase in arbitrary detentions and cases of torture during the first half of the year compared to 2023, alongside a broader crackdown on protests and public gatherings.

3 | Rule of Law

The Republic of the Congo's 2002 and 2015 constitutions formally enshrine checks and balances and a separation of powers among the executive, legislature and judiciary. In practice, however, these exist only on paper. All branches of authority – including the courts, National Assembly, Senate, media and armed forces – remain under the de facto control of President Denis Sassou Nguesso and his inner circle, ensuring near-total centralization of decision-making within the executive. The system is highly personalistic and autocratic. The 2015 constitution further consolidated this dominance by removing age and term limits, allowing Sassou Nguesso to retain power indefinitely. Current provisions would permit him to remain in office until 2031, by which time he will be 88.

Sassou Nguesso secured re-election for a fourth consecutive term in 2021, and despite widespread objections over irregularities, the Constitutional Court certified his landslide victory. The ruling Congolese Labor Party (PCT) has likewise consolidated its dominance in the legislature. In 2022 it won 112 out of 151 National Assembly

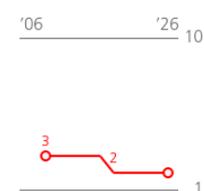
Freedom of expression

3



Separation of powers

2



seats, followed in 2023 by 52 out of 72 Senate seats – outcomes that ensured no meaningful oversight of the executive. The judiciary is equally dominated by loyalists.

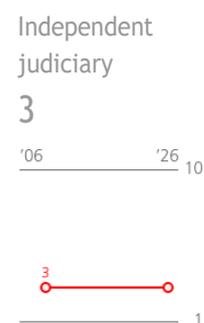
The media landscape is similarly subordinated to regime control. Most outlets are state-owned or allied with the presidency, including Radiodiffusion Télévision Congolaise (RTC), Les Dépêches de Brazzaville and Vox Media. These benefit from government subsidies that are withheld from independent competitors. Whether through loyalty or self-censorship, media outlets rarely contradict the regime, and reprisals against critical figures are common. Notable examples include the 2021 arrest of Augias Ray Malonga, editor of Sel-Piment, and the 2022 suspension of both Sel-Piment and VOX TV. Limited resources and fear of reprisal have further curtailed independent reporting, reinforcing the absence of genuine checks and balances on Sassou Nguesso's rule.

Judicial independence in the Republic of the Congo was most recently codified in the 2015 constitution, but in practice most courts, particularly the higher courts, remain highly politicized and loyal to President Denis Sassou Nguesso. The Constitutional Court and other senior judicial bodies have frequently served as instruments of regime legitimacy, rejecting fraud claims to certify electoral results. They are also used as tools of repression, targeting opposition figures, including the continued imprisonment of popular 2016 presidential candidates Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko and André Okombi Salissa. Higher courts thus remain largely subservient to regime demands and lack genuine independence or oversight.

By contrast, lower courts have generally functioned with somewhat greater autonomy, particularly in rural areas beyond the immediate reach of the central government. Traditional courts also play a supplementary role where the state's judicial presence is limited. Nonetheless, local courts are typically underfunded and overburdened, while the politicization of the higher judiciary undermines broader judicial integrity. Corruption and a lack of transparency in proceedings further erode independence and administrative effectiveness across the judicial system.

The Republic of the Congo remains among the most corrupt countries in the world, with little sign of improvement despite recent government efforts to signal a crackdown. In his August 2024 state of the nation address, President Denis Sassou Nguesso pledged to combat corruption, announcing the creation of a High Authority to lead the fight. Yet Sassou Nguesso and his inner circle remain implicated in many of the country's most high-profile corruption scandals.

In February 2024, Christian Roger Okemba, the former mayor of Brazzaville, was accused of corruption and sentenced to five years in prison that August. Such prosecutions, however, are widely seen as politically motivated and rarely target figures close to the presidency. By contrast, in March 2023, Sassou Nguesso's daughter Julienne Sassou Nguesso was named in an Investigate Europe report for



illegally accessing oil revenues, yet no charges followed. That same year, the president himself, along with his wife, son and a key minister, faced bribery allegations, but again no prosecutions ensued.

The 2015 constitution shields the president from prosecution for crimes committed while in office, and corruption cases typically target only political opponents or low-level scapegoats. Sassou Nguesso has long stood at the center of networks siphoning off domestic revenues from oil and other industries, and in the absence of transparency or oversight, corruption remains integral to the functioning of his personalistic regime. In earlier years, the Catholic Church and other domestic actors played an important role in challenging corruption, but such institutions have grown increasingly reluctant to speak out for fear of reprisals.

As in previous review periods, the government's de facto practices fall short of its de jure obligations to protect civil and human rights. Opposition parties and public protests are routinely repressed by state forces. Key opposition figures André Okombi Salissa and Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko, both of whom challenged Denis Sassou Nguesso in the 2016 presidential election, remain imprisoned after being sentenced to 20 years of hard labor in 2019 and 2018, respectively. During the current review period, demonstrations organized by opposition parties were again prohibited, including the planned March 2023 rally to honor former presidential candidate Guy Brice Parfait Kolélas, who died from COVID-19 shortly after the 2021 election.

Women and minority groups continue to face systemic discrimination in employment, housing and education, with occasional incidents of violence against non-Bantu communities and the targeting of Indigenous (Pygmy) groups. Women are denied equal pay, and formal restrictions limit access to certain employment opportunities for refugees and other foreign workers. Representation remains skewed: women and ethnic groups outside Sassou Nguesso's northern Mbochi base are under-represented in government, while the northern regions benefit disproportionately from state investment in health and infrastructure, leaving rural southern areas underserved and lacking basic services.

On LGBTQ+ rights, same-sex relations are legal but not recognized, and there is no legal framework for trans or other identities. Violence against LGBTQ+ individuals is infrequently reported and, when it occurs, is generally investigated and punished.

By contrast, religious discrimination remains minimal. The Republic of the Congo is largely free of sectarian conflict, although some security measures – notably the 2015 ban on citizens wearing the niqab – could be interpreted as disproportionately targeting the Muslim minority.

Civil rights

2

'06 '26 10



4 | Stability of Democratic Institutions

In principle, the Republic of the Congo is constitutionally democratic, with open elections, a separation of powers and formal checks on executive authority. In practice, however, power is concentrated in the hands of Denis Sassou Nguesso, whose authoritarian rule is cloaked in the façade of democratic institutions. Presidential and legislative contests in 2021, 2022 and 2023 served largely to rubber-stamp the dominance of Sassou Nguesso and the ruling PCT. A compliant judiciary certifies predetermined landslide victories, while opposition boycotts underscore the widespread recognition of electoral fraud. Over the course of his rule, Sassou Nguesso has entrenched his grip on power by suppressing dissent and systematically dismantling political opposition.

Despite the presence of formal democratic institutions, including regular elections and a functioning opposition, there is little evidence that key actors in the Republic of the Congo are committed to genuine democratic practice. President Denis Sassou Nguesso has ruled for all but five years since 1979, while the ruling PCT holds overwhelming majorities in both legislative chambers. The president and his inner circle dominate the country's political, economic and social institutions. Sassou Nguesso is shielded from domestic prosecution, and his allies operate with near-total impunity, as popular demonstrations are routinely banned or dispersed with force. Opposition parties and domestic NGOs show a commitment to advancing democracy, but their influence remains marginal, as they are frequently suppressed whenever their activities threaten regime interests.

5 | Political and Social Integration

In 1990, the Republic of the Congo formally transitioned to multiparty democracy, with the creation of more than 100 political parties. Yet party organization has long been shaped by regional and ethnic loyalties, leaving large portions of the population unrepresented by the major parties. As ideology plays only a minor role in the party system, polarization along programmatic lines remains limited.

Since Denis Sassou Nguesso's return to power in 1997, he and the ruling PCT have dominated the political system. All political parties must register with the government, which frequently denies recognition on arbitrary grounds. By 2021, only 55 of the country's roughly 200 political parties were legally recognized. The most significant opposition to the PCT has traditionally come from UPADS, IDC-FROCAD and the National Council of Republicans, though many of these groups boycotted the 2021 presidential election and rely on limited public financing, as private campaign donations are banned. In the 2022 legislative elections, the PCT and its allies won 123 of 151 National Assembly seats, while UPADS and UDH-

Performance of democratic institutions



Commitment to democratic institutions



Party system



YUKI each secured seven. In the August 2023 Senate elections, the PCT and its allies captured 64 of 72 seats, with independents taking seven and UPADS only one. Clientelism remains the defining feature of the ruling PCT and likely shapes the behavior of other parties operating under the same authoritarian framework.

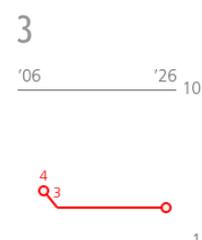
Trade unions, NGOs, civil society organizations and interest groups are formally protected under the 2015 constitution, but their ability to mediate between society and the political system remains constrained by government interference, limited resources and repression of leaders and members. The Congolese Observatory of Human Rights (OCDH) has long been the most prominent organization advocating for transparency and the protection of civil and human rights, yet groups such as these are frequently suppressed when expedient for the regime, particularly during presidential elections.

The Catholic Church and other religious institutions have historically played an important role in holding the government accountable, but their influence in mediating between state and society has waned in recent years. Trade unions likewise enjoy constitutional protections, but enforcement of labor rights is inconsistent and the government often intervenes in disputes, especially those involving the country's largest union, the Congolese Trade Union Confederation (CSC). Given the regime's ethnoregional orientation, non-northerners, women and non-Bantu populations remain particularly vulnerable to underrepresentation.

While the Republic of the Congo remains an authoritarian state, its citizens express a clear preference for democracy. The first Afrobarometer survey in 2024 found that 75% of Congolese support elections as the best way to choose leaders. Frequent demonstrations against authoritarian practices further underscore public dissatisfaction and a demand for genuine political choice and functioning multiparty democracy. Turnout figures illustrate this disconnect. Official data put participation in the 2021 presidential election at 70%, though independent estimates suggest it was closer to 15%. No official turnout was released for the August 2023 Senate elections, but legislative contests generally draw less participation than presidential polls. Overall engagement with the political system remains low, driven largely by a lack of trust in state institutions.

A long history of ethnoregional conflict and state repression has entrenched deep social divisions in the Republic of the Congo, eroding social capital and trust across identity groups. These divisions shape both political and economic life. Under Denis Sassou Nguesso, the regime has consistently favored northern regions – particularly his home Cuvette region – at the expense of the more populous southern regions, leaving southern populations and minority groups under-represented at the national level. In this context, local associations and community-based organizations have become a critical source of social capital, providing most Congolese citizens with their primary means of self-organization and representation.

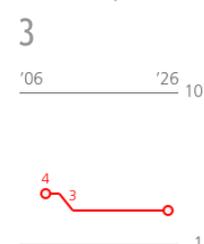
Interest groups



Approval of democracy



Social capital



II. Economic Transformation

6 | Level of Socioeconomic Development

Despite substantial oil revenues, large segments of the population remain excluded from meaningful participation in society due to persistent poverty and inequality. The Republic of the Congo scored 0.593 on the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI), ranking 149 out of 193 countries, a medium level of human development. This standing has remained largely unchanged across review periods, as revenues from oil and mineral wealth have failed to translate into improved services or opportunities for most citizens. The country loses 35.1% of its HDI score as a result of inequality. Its most recent Gini index score was 48.9, while the Gender Inequality Index stood at 0.572, ranking 147 out of 170 countries.

The Human Capital Index (HCI) is similarly low at 0.42, below the average for lower-middle-income countries. Although overall unemployment declined modestly in 2023 to 19.9% of the labor force, youth unemployment rose to 42%. Despite some restructuring and better debt management, the Republic of the Congo remains in debt distress and vulnerable to volatility in global oil markets – a structural weakness that continues to drive poverty and inequality for most Congolese citizens.

Economic indicators		2021	2022	2023	2024
GDP	\$ M	14825.7	15817.0	15321.1	15720.0
GDP growth	%	1.0	1.5	1.9	2.6
Inflation (CPI)	%	1.7	3.0	4.3	3.1
Unemployment	%	22.0	20.1	19.9	19.7
Foreign direct investment	% of GDP	-2.2	3.4	4.1	3.8
Export growth	%	-1.0	-0.7	1.0	-0.5
Import growth	%	25.0	5.9	8.9	5.0
Current account balance	\$ M	1715.9	-	-	-
Public debt	% of GDP	97.8	93.5	102.9	98.0
External debt	\$ M	8254.5	7862.0	7779.2	-
Total debt service	\$ M	394.2	878.4	772.2	-

Question
Score

Socioeconomic
barriers

3

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Economic indicators		2021	2022	2023	2024
Net lending/borrowing	% of GDP	1.3	-	-	-
Tax revenue	% of GDP	6.5	-	-	-
Government consumption	% of GDP	14.9	11.8	13.1	13.4
Public education spending	% of GDP	3.3	2.7	3.3	-
Public health spending	% of GDP	1.7	0.8	-	-
R&D expenditure	% of GDP	-	0.4	-	-
Military expenditure	% of GDP	2.3	1.9	2.0	-

Sources (as of December 2025): 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

Despite recent growth in non-oil sectors and modest improvements in domestic debt management, the Republic of the Congo has largely failed to honor its commitments to creditors such as the IMF to diversify its economy. Oil still accounts for roughly 80% of exports, leaving the economy heavily dependent on foreign companies and regime-linked entities such as the state-owned oil company SNPC. Their dominance over oil and mineral exports crowds out competition from other domestic industries.

The Republic of the Congo scored 47.8 on the Heritage Foundation's 2024 Index of Economic Freedom, ranking 156 out of 184 countries worldwide and 38 out of 47 in sub-Saharan Africa. Classified as "repressed," the country's score declined by 0.3 points since 2023, placing it below both global and regional averages. Poor governance and a weak rule of law continue to undermine economic freedom, while corruption, an ineffective judiciary, heavy state interference and sluggish reforms constrain the development of a formal domestic labor market.

Data is limited, but ILO estimates suggest that informal sector employment accounts for up to 85% of total jobs, with the informal economy representing about half of official GDP. Subsistence and informal activity thus remain central to livelihoods, while inadequate infrastructure and weak institutions prevent meaningful expansion of the formal sector.

Market
organization

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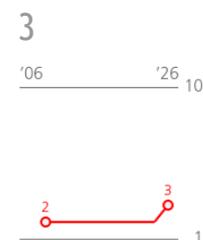
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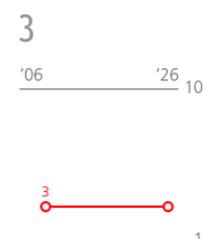
The Republic of the Congo has enacted a competition law prohibiting anti-competitive agreements and practices. In July 2024, the law was amended to cover foreign entities, marking an unprecedented step toward antitrust and pro-competition protections. Yet, despite this legal progress, the Congolese economy has long been dominated by monopolistic behavior, most notably through the state-owned oil company SNPC. Concerns over enforcement remain acute. The judiciary receives a 0/4 rating from Freedom House for transparency and independence, and the country scores just 35.9 (out of a possible 100) in business freedom, 35 in investment freedom and 30 in financial freedom on the Index of Economic Freedom. These weak governance conditions cast doubt on the law's practical impact. The Republic of the Congo is also not a member of the International Competition Network, further limiting the credibility of its commitment to competitive markets.

Competition policy



The Republic of the Congo remains heavily dependent on foreign trade, with exports and imports together accounting for 83% of GDP in the most recent data. The country operates under a General System of Preference within CEMAC and applies a Common External Tariff of 5% on basic products, 10% on raw materials and 20–30% on other goods from non-CEMAC states. The trade-weighted average tariff rate stands at 15.2%, and additional non-tariff barriers further constrain trade. Net foreign direct investment inflows amounted to 0.2% of GDP in 2023, a slight improvement over the negative figures recorded in previous years. The Republic of the Congo scored 49.6 in trade freedom on the Index of Economic Freedom, while limited financial services, economic mismanagement and political instability continue to weigh on trade and investment.

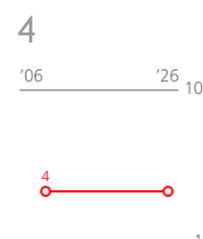
Liberalization of foreign trade



A WTO member since 1997, the Republic of the Congo has faced persistent pressure to diversify its economy and improve governance, but dependence on extractive industries remains entrenched. Heavy state interference in key sectors and weak regulatory frameworks undermine investor confidence and have prevented the emergence of a strong domestic investment climate. Although there has been modest growth in non-oil sectors, this has not altered the broader trajectory. As long as the state and economy remain tied to oil and mineral exports, meaningful liberalization is likely to remain slow.

As in previous review periods, the distinction between the banking system and capital market in the Republic of the Congo remains weak, with regulation and supervision falling short of Basel standards. Fewer than 10 commercial banks are active in the country, excluding subsidiaries, and financial freedom continues to rank among the weakest indicators in the Republic of the Congo's performance on the Index of Economic Freedom. The largest bank, BGFI Congo, is owned by members of President Denis Sassou Nguesso's family, while most other major banks are controlled by foreign interests, particularly from France and Morocco. As a CEMAC member, monetary policy is set by the Bank of Central African States (BEAC). The Republic of the Congo has no domestic stock exchange.

Banking system



Banking penetration is estimated at just 10 – 12%, though figures vary. In 2022, the bank capital-to-assets ratio stood at 11.2%, while 16.8% of loans were non-performing. The capital adequacy ratio, however, reached 24%, reflecting improvements in risk-weighted assets alongside positive trends in credit and deposits. Overall, banking and capital markets in the Republic of the Congo remain weak and underdeveloped, dominated by a handful of commercial banks, including state-owned firms, and hampered by corruption and limited transparency. Financial intermediation is low, and efforts to diversify growth through investment or expand access via microfinance and electronic banking have advanced only slowly.

8 | Monetary and fiscal stability

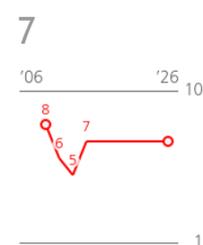
As a member of CEMAC and the CFA franc zone, the Republic of the Congo's monetary policy is largely managed by external institutions. As in previous review periods, this arrangement has provided a degree of fiscal stability through predictable exchange rates and monetary policy. Inflation (CPI) reached 4.3% in 2023, the highest level since 2013, when it stood at 4.6%. Over the past decade, inflation has fluctuated considerably, dropping as low as 0.5% in 2017 before rising again in 2023. The most recent increase was driven primarily by fuel subsidies introduced to maintain fiscal surpluses. These pressures persisted into 2024, fueled by higher fuel costs as well as increases in cement and beer prices.

The Republic of the Congo imposes no domestic legal restrictions on foreign exchange, but in 2022 CEMAC's central bank, BEAC, introduced new regulations on international payments and transfers. These include monitoring transfers above \$100,000, requiring bank records for transfers over \$10,000, and mandating special authorization for individual transfers above \$2,000 and corporate transfers above \$20,000. Despite limited banking penetration, foreign exchange remains widely accessible, with the CFA franc fully convertible at a fixed exchange rate of €1 to CFA 655.957.

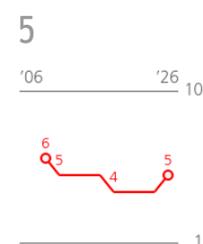
The Republic of the Congo recorded modest GDP growth of about 2% in both 2023 and 2024 and is projected to average 3.4% in 2025/26. Despite this growth, the country remains in debt distress, posting a budget deficit equal to 1.7% of GDP in 2023. The debt-to-GDP ratio stood at 99% in 2023 but is expected to decline to 83.8% by 2026. While improved debt management and restructuring have helped create a more stable fiscal environment in recent years, these gains remain fragile given ongoing volatility and fiscal instability.

External debt reached \$7.9 billion in 2022, with debt service climbing to \$835.9 million, the highest level since 2010. Congo briefly operated as a net lender in 2021 at 1.3% of GDP, but this figure has proven volatile, with the country registering as a net borrower at -5.7% in 2020. Government consumption equaled 13.1% of GDP in 2023, while total reserves fell to \$715.4 million, their lowest level since 2018.

Monetary stability



Fiscal stability



9 | Private Property

As in previous review periods, laws and regulations formally guarantee the protection of private property rights, but corruption and the dominance of personalistic institutions undermine their enforcement. Property transactions are frequently mishandled, with accusations of favoritism and irregularities commonplace. Intellectual property rights are formally protected through Congo's membership in the African Intellectual Property Organization under CEMAC, as well as its obligations as a member of the WTO.

While the constitution provides for the right to own private property, this guarantee is overshadowed by the influence of state-owned enterprises and regime-aligned groups that enjoy preferential access to land and resources in key sectors. These entities are routinely accused of corruption and money laundering, including direct allegations against the president and his family. In the absence of transparency or independent oversight, such protections are inconsistently applied. Ultimately, Sassou Nguesso's control over the judiciary and key sectors ensures that private property rights are upheld only to the extent that they do not conflict with the interests of the regime.

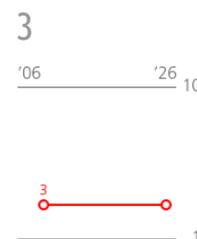
Private enterprise in the Republic of the Congo remains constrained by the dominance of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), particularly in the extractive sector, alongside weak diversification and a lack of transparency in core processes. Although non-oil sectors have recorded modest growth in recent years, the private sector continues to play a limited role in the economy. According to World Bank data, private sector gross capital formation accounted for only 18% of GDP in 2020. Public investment is concentrated in the extractive, banking and tourism sectors, where access and distribution are shaped by clientelism, corruption and favoritism. Both domestic and foreign investment are further hindered by poor economic management and persistent political instability. Corporate tax rates have remained steady at 30%, while taxes on income, profit and capital gains accounted for 27.2% of all taxes in the most recent data, down from 36.6% in 2020.

10 | Welfare Regime

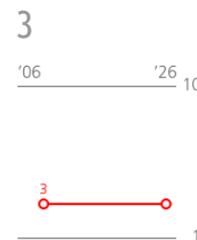
Socioeconomic barriers such as extreme poverty and youth unemployment remain pressing challenges in the Republic of the Congo, and the country's rudimentary social safety nets cover only a limited range of risks and beneficiaries.

Public expenditure on health rose to 1.9% of GDP in 2021, up from 0.8% in 2019, but this increase has translated only slowly into tangible improvements in social protection and socioeconomic conditions, partly because of pervasive corruption in the health sector. Life expectancy at birth fell to 63.1 years in 2022, down from 64.8

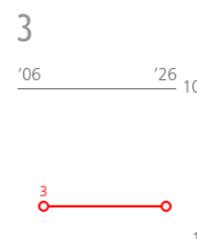
Property rights



Private enterprise



Social safety nets



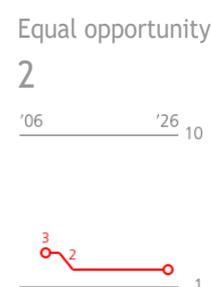
in 2020. The country's Human Capital Index score has remained stagnant at 0.42, below the average for lower-middle-income countries. Infant mortality remains high at 32 deaths per 1,000 live births, and according to UNICEF, 8.2% of children under 5 suffer from malnutrition, including 2.6% from severe acute malnutrition.

Overall, only 15% of the population has access to social protection services, according to the Agence Française de Développement (AFD). In recent years, several initiatives have been introduced under the National Social Action Policy (PNAS). Chief among these are the Lisungi project, launched in 2014 to provide cash transfers to vulnerable families, and TELEMA, launched in 2021 to support socioeconomic integration through assistance to micro-entrepreneurs. Both projects have received support from international partners, including AFD and the World Bank.

Opportunities for women and minority groups to access education, employment or public office remain limited, though women's representation in legislative bodies has improved slightly over the current review period. Women won 25 of 151 seats in the National Assembly in the 2022 elections and 22 of 72 seats in the Senate in 2023. While these figures mark progress, they still underscore the absence of equal opportunity. In 2022, Evelyne Tchitchelle of the ruling PCT became the country's first female mayor when she was elected in Pointe-Noire.

Gender disparities persist in education and employment. Female literacy in 2021 stood at 75.4%, compared with 85.9% among men. Ratios on the Gender Parity Index were 1.0 in primary education, 0.9 in secondary and 0.7 in tertiary, reflecting diminishing opportunities as women advance through the system. Although women make up 49.7% of the labor force, they continue to face discrimination in both education and employment. On the 2021 U.N. Gender Inequality Index, the Republic of the Congo ranked 147 out of 170 countries.

Minority groups also face entrenched disadvantages. Indigenous (Pygmy) communities, refugees and foreign workers, as well as the more populous southern populations, remain marginalized. Under Denis Sassou Nguesso's rule, the regime has consistently favored northern populations, particularly members of his Mbochi ethnic group, leaving non-northern and non-Bantu communities at a systemic disadvantage in terms of access to education, employment and public office.



11 | Economic Performance

Despite moderate GDP growth of around 2% in 2023/24 and projections averaging 3.4% for 2025/2026, the Republic of the Congo's economic performance remains weak. Per capita GDP growth was -0.4% in 2023, which marks an improvement over the previous review period but continues the pattern of negative per capita growth recorded every year since 2014. The country's GDP stands at \$40.4 billion (PPP), with a per capita GDP of \$6,933 (PPP) in 2023. Its account balance in 2021 was \$1.715 billion. Growth in 2023 was driven by both oil and non-oil sectors, with oil expanding by 1.4% and non-oil sectors by 2.8%, including 5.7% growth in agriculture.

Inflation (CPI) reached 4.3% in 2023, the highest level since 2013 (4.6%). Unemployment declined slightly to 20.1%, though youth unemployment rose to 42%. Poverty also increased, affecting 46.8% of the population. The debt-to-GDP ratio stood at 99% in 2023, an improvement compared with the previous review period, and is projected to fall to 83.8% by 2026. Gross capital formation rose to 25.2% of GDP in 2023 from 21% in 2022. Foreign direct investment reached 4.1% of GDP in 2023, a marked improvement over earlier years.

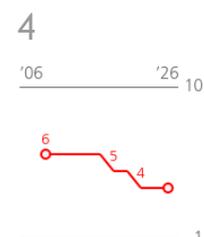
The Republic of the Congo is undergoing a fragile economic recovery. Risks tied to oil price volatility, postponed investments in key sectors, tighter financial controls and climate change continue to weigh on the economy. Even so, growth in both oil and non-oil sectors, alongside expected expansion in gas, has supported modest GDP gains and improved debt management. While progress remains slow and the country is still in debt distress, steady growth in some non-oil sectors has offered a degree of stability to an otherwise volatile economy.

12 | Sustainability

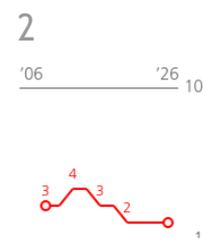
The Republic of the Congo has 22.3 million hectares of forest, accounting for 65.4% of its total land area, and 14.67 million hectares (65.8%) are designated as forest concessions. Despite the prominence of the country's timber industry, forest cover has declined at a rate of only -0.1% per year since 1990. Carbon dioxide emissions were 1.2 metric tons per capita in 2023 and have remained relatively steady in recent years. Renewable energy usage as a share of total final energy consumption rose to 71.4% in 2021, with the remaining 28.6% of energy needs met by fossil fuels. These figures can be considered a direct result of government policy, given the state-run nature of the country's utilities.

Impacts from climate change, including flooding, drought and soil degradation, continue to affect much of the country, with around 170,000 people impacted annually in the Republic of the Congo's river corridor. During the present review

Output strength



Environmental policy



period, floods from heavy rainfall at the end of 2023 impacted more than 1.8 million people by January 2024, according to the Congolese Red Cross. The operation of extractive and other industries continues to drive pollution in the Republic of the Congo, with the June 2023 shutdown of a lead recycling plant in Vindoulou due to contamination levels 10 times higher than WHO-recommended thresholds a significant recent example of Congolese industry threatening the health of its environment and citizens.

The Republic of the Congo participated in the One Forest Summit in Libreville, Gabon, in March 2023 as well as the Three Basins Summit in October 2023, committing to work domestically and internationally to protect forests in the Congo River basin. CCFD-Terre Solidaire denounced the former as “greenwashing” absent local input, however, and all the countries in the region including Republic of the Congo have faced similar accusations in the past. The Republic of the Congo has consistently shown a willingness to sign onto environmental protection agreements, including the 2015 Paris Agreement, but results from regional and domestic measures remain very uncertain. The Republic of the Congo recorded a Red List Index score of 0.966 in 2021, indicating almost none of its species are at risk of extinction. Only three species were critically endangered in the Republic of the Congo in 2019, according to data from the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

The Republic of the Congo under Denis Sassou Nguesso has consistently allocated low levels of public spending to education, training and research and development, a trend that continued during the current review period. Public expenditure on education fell to 3% of GDP in 2022, down from 3.7% in 2021 and 4.6% in 2020. Spending on R&D was just 0.4% of GDP in 2022.

The country scored 0.621 on the U.N. Education Index between 2020 and 2022, marking only a slight improvement over previous years. Literacy stood at 80.6% in 2021, with rates of 75.4% for women and 85.9% for men. The gross enrollment ratio was 89% for primary education, 65.6% for secondary and 10.4% for tertiary, reflecting a sharp drop-off in later stages. According to UNESCO, secondary enrollment was 46% for females and 51% for males, falling further to 10% and 15%, respectively, at the tertiary level. Completion rates also highlight gaps: 66% for girls and 64% for boys in primary education, declining to 14.1% and 24.2% at lower secondary.

Although these figures represent marginal improvements compared with earlier periods, learning poverty remains severe. UNESCO and other organizations estimate that about 70% of children are unable to read and understand an age-appropriate text by age 10, with some estimates placing the figure as high as 88% among primary students. Shortcomings in education quality and resources, particularly in rural areas, combined with gender-specific challenges, such as high rates of child marriage and discrimination, continue to undermine the provision of basic education, training and R&D, especially for women.

Education policy /
R&D

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Governance

I. Level of Difficulty

Structural constraints on governance in the Republic of the Congo include persistent poverty, a lack of skilled labor, heavy dependence on oil revenues, and a clientelistic political system.

During the current review period, the Republic of the Congo experienced a modest continuation of economic recovery, with moderate GDP growth supported by both oil and non-oil sectors. This progress has been undermined by rising inflation, increasing poverty and youth unemployment, and continued debt distress, despite several debt restructuring agreements. Slow advances in infrastructure and social development, coupled with entrenched structural barriers, raise doubts about the country's ability to sustain momentum over the medium to long term.

Since 2019, the Republic of the Congo has maintained good standing with the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), which it first joined in 2007. In 2023, it was assessed with a “moderate” validation status, though many observers contest this evaluation. While some progress has been made toward improving transparency in the extractive industries, the latest EITI report highlighted the negative effects of social conflicts surrounding the management of resource revenues. President Denis Sassou Nguesso and his state apparatus, particularly through the state-owned SNPC, retain substantial control over the sector and continue to face accusations of corruption and mismanagement.

These structural constraints have long limited the impact of economic growth on governance and domestic development. GDP growth averaged about 2% in 2023/24 and is projected to rise to 3.4% in 2025/26. The debt-to-GDP ratio is also expected to improve in the coming years. However, per capita GDP growth remains negative, and the Congolese population has not benefited from recovery in terms of access to water and sanitation, health care, education or employment, particularly in rural areas.

Climate change has further exacerbated vulnerabilities. Heavy flooding continues to periodically displace large segments of the population, while the lack of regulation in polluting industries places citizens' health and the environment at heightened risk. These challenges are compounded by recurring disease outbreaks and chronic malnutrition, which affects roughly 20% of children under five. In short, despite limited progress in some areas, structural constraints on governance in the Republic of the Congo remain deeply entrenched.

Structural
constraints

7



Civil society traditions in the Republic of the Congo remain weak, and social trust is low. The operations of civil society organizations (CSOs) are constrained by widespread corruption and the repressive nature of Denis Sassou Nguesso’s regime. The president and the ruling PCT have consolidated their dominance over political institutions, aided by the shrinking space for civil society in recent years, including the arbitrary arrest of prominent activists. Ethnoregional divisions continue to shape politics and society, reinforcing entrenched north–south cleavages.

Freedom House classifies the Republic of the Congo as “not free,” giving it a score of 15 out of 60 on civil liberties and 0 out of 4 on NGO freedom, citing systematic repression, burdensome registration requirements with the Interior Ministry, and growing self-censorship among organizations.

Numerous CSOs remain active, many under the umbrella of PCPA Congo, but they face persistent repression and intimidation. In May 2024, for example, 20 members of Ras-le-Bol were arrested in front of the Pointe-Noire high court, while another three, including coordinator Frank Nzila, were detained in Brazzaville while protesting for their release. Such incidents are common, and reports indicate a rise in the use of torture against political prisoners during the review period. These patterns have deepened the reluctance of civil society actors to confront the government on issues such as corruption and human rights abuses.

Protests and strikes are frequently met with force, while union members and journalists face harassment, intimidation, and arbitrary detention. Citizens and CSOs in the southern districts – particularly in the Pool region – have little influence over or trust in the central government and are subject to discrimination and coercion. Indigenous populations remain especially vulnerable, facing forced evictions, excessive use of force and arbitrary detention. These groups are excluded from meaningful national representation, and local CSOs have limited impact outside of partnerships with international NGOs.

The Republic of the Congo has long been shaped by ethnoregional conflict, most recently the Pool conflict of 2016 – 2018, which continues to weigh heavily on conditions for residents of the region. Political institutions remain dominated by Denis Sassou Nguesso and the northern-led PCT, which further consolidated control in the 2022 and 2023 legislative elections. This dominance has been sustained through systematic repression of dissent and the marginalization of southern and non-Bantu populations.

Former opposition presidential candidates Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko and André Okombi Salissa remain imprisoned, serving 20-year sentences of hard labor handed down in 2018 and 2019. Activists, trade unionists and journalists also face repression, including arbitrary detention and the use of force by security forces. In July 2023, artist and activist DSP Malakay was arrested and held for a week after criticizing the government’s handling of outbreaks of shigellosis, cholera and typhoid that swept

Civil society traditions

8

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Conflict intensity

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through the south in June 2023. Reports of increased use of torture against political prisoners in 2024 further highlight the regime's reliance on excessive and violent repression, which fuels broader social conflict.

While regional instability presents some risks, the threat of spillover has not increased significantly during the review period. The 2023 coup in Gabon and continuing violence in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo could heighten risks if instability escalates, but for now these remain limited. Political and social cleavages in Congo continue to center on ethnoregional divisions, with the Pool conflict the most recent flashpoint. Despite the 2017 cease-fire and 2018 disarmament, repression by the northern-dominated regime continues to entrench these divides and sustain the conditions for future conflict.

II. Governance Performance

14 | Steering Capability

The government in the Republic of the Congo consistently claims to set strategic priorities, but these are undermined by endemic corruption within Denis Sassou Nguesso's personalistic regime. Strategic commitments are largely rhetorical, as the president and his allies maintain control over all political institutions and key economic sectors while suppressing most opposition. Policies are dictated by the interests of elite clientelist networks, and national-level priorities often lack substance without consistent or equitable implementation.

While there have been modest improvements in debt management, the country remains in debt distress and reliant on restructuring agreements with external institutions. In its dealings with the IMF and other partners, the Republic of the Congo has repeatedly pledged to strengthen regulation, combat corruption and diversify its economy. Yet these commitments have not translated into meaningful changes in governance. Recent economic recovery, driven by growth in both oil and non-oil sectors, has not been broadly shared. Promised improvements in infrastructure, health and education have failed to reach most communities. The economy remains overwhelmingly dependent on oil, with no coherent strategy for diversification beyond the expansion of other extractive industries such as gas, leaving the country highly exposed to global market volatility.

Development is further constrained by slow progress in building essential infrastructure such as electricity, sanitation and clean water, particularly in rural areas. Brazzaville, Pointe-Noire and Sassou Nguesso's home Cuvette region in the north remain the primary beneficiaries of investment, while much of the country is

Question
Score

Prioritization

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neglected. Large segments of the population thus remain vulnerable and excluded from the supposed benefits of strategic priorities. Epidemics and severe flooding have affected wide swathes of the population during the review period, with the government's responses frequently criticized as inadequate. Although the Pool conflict subsided several years ago, the region continues to suffer from widespread destruction and minimal reconstruction, reflecting the regime's enduring bias against southern regions.

As in previous review periods, the government of the Republic of the Congo continues to make rhetorical commitments to diversification, socioeconomic development and sustainability, yet progress remains limited and implementation of relevant policies inconsistent. Debt management has improved, moderate economic growth has been sustained in the short term and overall unemployment has declined. At the same time, however, poverty and youth unemployment have risen, and the population has seen little tangible benefit from growth or debt restructuring. The Republic of the Congo has signed international agreements to protect the environment, but weak regulation and poor enforcement have meant that emissions and other environmental indicators show little improvement, while health impacts from pollution persist.

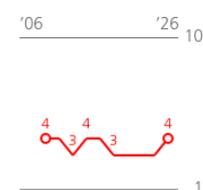
Pressure to curb corruption and strengthen transparency in the extractive sector has been constant from both domestic actors and international partners. Nevertheless, under Denis Sassou Nguesso, the state has remained centered on entrenched clientelist networks, with enforcement measures largely limited to scapegoats and political opponents. Formal commitments have been expanded during the current review period, but they have produced no major impact. Despite recent gains in non-oil sectors, diversification has been slow, and the economy remains overwhelmingly dependent on oil exports, with few benefits reaching the majority of Congolese citizens.

During the current review period, the Republic of the Congo has experienced moderate economic growth, a declining debt burden and falling unemployment. Yet pro-cyclical fiscal and spending policies continue to expose the economy to volatility and the risk of crisis. Despite gains in both oil and non-oil sectors, the country remains in debt distress. Growth has failed to benefit the majority of the population, as the government has responded to debt restructuring and a lighter debt burden with unsustainable borrowing leveraged against future revenues, perpetuating a cycle of indebtedness and mismanagement.

Persistent pressure from international partners has done little to shift government behavior. Authorities have shown limited willingness to acknowledge policy failures and have made little progress in curbing corruption, diversifying the economy or pursuing sustainability. Instead, the regime has remained focused on driving growth through extractive industries, leaving socioeconomic development largely stagnant. Access to basic public services remains weak and vulnerable to shocks such as

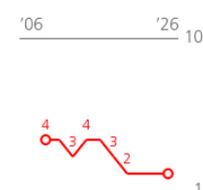
Implementation

4



Policy learning

2



epidemics and flooding, while poverty and youth unemployment have both risen during a period officially characterized as economic recovery. As in previous review periods, despite rhetorical commitments to social and human rights improvements, activists and civil society organizations face harassment and repression, and the government has shown little capacity or political will to learn from past shortcomings or translate lessons into long-term development objectives.

15 | Resource Efficiency

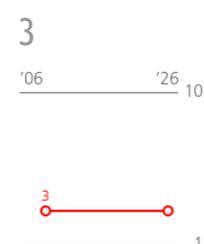
The Republic of the Congo continues to be defined by inefficient use of domestic resources, entrenched corruption and ongoing debt distress. Governance remains highly personalistic and centralized, with clientelist networks around President Denis Sassou Nguesso dominating key markets, diverting public revenues and undermining policy coherence and institutional coordination. While the government has sought to expand oil and gas production to sustain recent economic growth, continued reliance on extractive sectors leaves the country acutely exposed to external market volatility. Although indebtedness has declined and debt management has improved in recent years, these gains have not translated into meaningful improvements in socioeconomic conditions for most Congolese.

State-owned enterprises retain near-monopolistic control over key industries, and ethnoregional favoritism continues to shape the distribution of revenues and benefits, with vested interests and major urban centers capturing the bulk of economic gains during recovery periods such as the present.

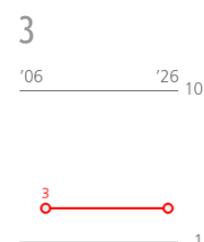
Endemic corruption, weak regulation and a lack of transparency in strategic sectors undermine public administration and resource management, limiting efficiency and long-term development. In the current review period, former Brazzaville mayor Christian Roger Okemba was sentenced to five years in prison on corruption charges. President Denis Sassou Nguesso has announced a renewed anti-corruption drive, yet he, his family and members of his inner circle continue to face persistent allegations, including a 2023 lawsuit accusing them of siphoning \$25 billion in state revenues. Despite repeated rhetorical commitments, little tangible progress has been made in strengthening domestic resource management or ensuring more equitable distribution. Moderate growth in both oil and non-oil sectors has coincided with rising poverty and youth unemployment, underscoring the government's failure to channel its resources into meaningful development or governance reforms.

As in previous review periods, Denis Sassou Nguesso has preserved a highly personalistic and centralized state apparatus, relying on clientelist networks and weak oversight to dominate key sectors, divert public funds and undermine the coherence of government policy and coordination. State-owned and foreign enterprises continue to dominate the domestic marketplace, operating in an environment with little transparency or effective regulation. Ethnoregional cleavages and the regime's favoritism toward northern constituencies remain defining features of political and economic life. Social benefits are largely concentrated in major urban centers and

Efficient use of assets



Policy coordination



northern regions, while economic gains accrue primarily to elites and vested interests. Although improved debt management and restructuring agreements have reduced the country's debt burden, the Republic of the Congo remains in debt distress amid a fragile economic recovery and a persistent lack of diversification. The government's failure to deliver on commitments to diversification, transparency and oversight has left it unable to pursue coherent strategies for development, poverty alleviation or sustainability.

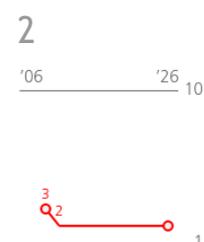
The Republic of the Congo has ostensibly taken steps to improve transparency and contain corruption, including President Denis Sassou Nguesso's 2024 announcement of a new High Authority to fight graft. In practice, however, the president and his inner circle continue to operate with impunity in their management of domestic resources. Periodic prosecutions, such as the sentencing of former Brazzaville mayor Christian Roger Okemba, typically serve as scapegoating exercises, while those closest to the presidency remain at the core of entrenched clientelist networks. The true scale of revenues lost to corruption under Sassou Nguesso is impossible to measure, though a recent \$25 billion lawsuit underscores the extent of alleged embezzlement. With a compromised judiciary and no meaningful oversight of the political elite, corruption remains a defining obstacle to governance and development.

Whether Sassou Nguesso's renewed anti-corruption drive will amount to more than scapegoating – or whether recent debt relief and modest growth will instead deepen existing patterns – remains uncertain. The Republic of the Congo is formally committed to the African Peer Review Mechanism and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and has faced pressure from CEMAC, the IMF and the World Bank to curb corruption. Yet in the current review period, progress has been limited to rhetorical commitments, with no substantive change in practice.

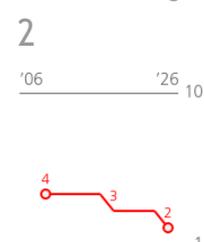
16 | Consensus-Building

Denis Sassou Nguesso first assumed the presidency of the Republic of the Congo in 1979 and secured re-election in 2021 in elections widely dismissed as unfree and boycotted by the opposition. His rule was briefly interrupted during the country's experiment with multiparty politics between 1992 and 1997, but he returned to power after prevailing in the 1997–99 civil war and has since consolidated a near-total monopoly on power. The ruling PCT extended its dominance in both chambers of the legislature in the 2022 and 2023 elections, which, like the presidential vote, were broadly regarded as fraudulent and likewise boycotted by major opposition parties. While recent legislative cycles have been relatively calm, the regime relies on security forces, harassment and intimidation – including restrictions on public gatherings and internet access – to curtail opposition and civil society. Key opposition leaders, including two former presidential candidates, remain imprisoned.

Anti-corruption
policy



Consensus on goals



Although formally a multiparty democracy, Congo functions as a de facto one-party state. Sassou Nguesso and the PCT sit at the center of a highly personalized, centralized system with minimal oversight and a judiciary loyal to the executive. No legal mechanisms exist to remove the president or prosecute him for acts committed in office, and the 2015 constitution eliminated most constraints on his ability to retain power indefinitely.

The Republic of the Congo has continued its economic recovery during the current review period, with moderate growth driven by both oil and non-oil sectors. Debt management has improved and the debt burden has eased, yet the country remains in distress and highly vulnerable to swings in global oil markets, reflecting its ongoing reluctance to diversify. The government aims to expand oil and gas production in the coming years, but reliance on hydrocarbons – and on borrowing against future revenues – remains a central obstacle to building a more balanced market economy.

Control of oil and other strategic industries is concentrated among SOEs, foreign firms and companies tied to Sassou Nguesso’s inner circle, ensuring that the benefits of growth accrue to a narrow elite. For most citizens, employment continues to revolve around subsistence and informal sectors, while youth unemployment and poverty have risen during the review period. Gas production is slated to expand further, and there has been modest growth in agriculture, but the economy remains dominated by natural resource exports and foreign trade, offering few jobs and exposing the country to external volatility.

Recent gains in growth and debt reduction have reinforced the regime’s reliance on extractive industries, leaving little incentive to strengthen domestic markets or diversify the economy. Although limited reforms have occasionally been pursued during periods of crisis, the current recovery has largely entrenched dependence on oil and gas, sidelining the sectors where most Congolese make their livelihoods.

Power in the Republic of the Congo remains concentrated in the hands of President Denis Sassou Nguesso and his ruling clique, the country’s primary anti-democratic actors. Opposition parties and reformers wield virtually no influence over decision-making, as the government remains highly centralized. Sassou Nguesso secured re-election in 2021, and his PCT party expanded its dominance in the 2022 and 2023 legislative elections, both of which were boycotted by opposition parties. Key opposition leaders remain imprisoned. The regime is highly personalistic and autocratic, routinely silencing dissent through repression of opposition parties, activists, journalists and NGOs. The present review period has seen a rise in the use of torture against political dissidents, further entrenching fear and coercion as tools of control. Civil society has grown increasingly cautious about challenging the regime, allowing Sassou Nguesso and his inner circle to govern with impunity, consolidating their grip on power through fraudulent elections.

Anti-democratic actors

2

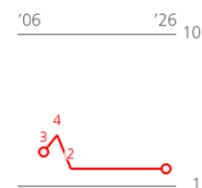
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As in the previous review period, the Republic of the Congo’s government has maintained control over domestic cleavages, though largely through measures that deepen them. Political conflict continues to revolve around entrenched north–south ethnoregional divides. The regime favors individuals from President Sassou Nguesso’s home Cuvette region and his Mbochi ethnic group for senior posts and military recruitment, while the more populous southern groups, particularly the Lari and Kongo, are systematically excluded from access to resources or positions. These dynamics have exacerbated the very divisions that fueled the 2016 – 2018 civil conflict in the deprived Pool region surrounding Brazzaville.

Cleavage / conflict management

2

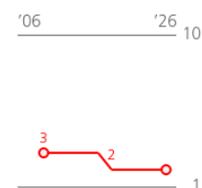


The party system mirrors these divides. The ruling PCT is backed primarily by northern constituencies, while opposition in recent legislative elections has come chiefly from UPADS, which draws support from the southern Nibolek (Niari, Bouenza, Lekoumou) districts. UPADS and MCDDI, both rooted in southern strongholds such as Pool, have historically led opposition challenges in presidential contests. Southern opposition figures remain frequent targets of repression, with reports of rising torture against political prisoners during the current review period. Boycotts of elections are common, reflecting widespread perceptions of fraud, while repression, exclusion of southern populations and arbitrary arrests further entrench Congo’s most damaging cleavages and perpetuate the regime’s fragile legitimacy.

There is a large and active civil society in the Republic of the Congo, but in recent years violence and arbitrary arrests by the regime have created hesitancy among actors to challenge government corruption or human rights abuses. The authorities have shown little willingness to cooperate or consult with civil society organizations. Groups such as the Congolese Observatory for Human Rights (OCDH) and the Center for Actions for Development (CAD), alongside individual activists and journalists, continue to play an important role, but harassment, intimidation, arbitrary detention and an increase in reported cases of torture, combined with limited resources, have significantly curtailed their activities. Despite long-standing efforts to promote democratization and development, the impact of these groups remains constrained by a regime that routinely punishes dissent and criticism.

Public consultation

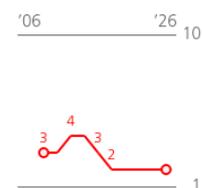
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The Republic of the Congo has never established a truth and reconciliation commission, either after the 1997 – 1999 civil war that restored Denis Sassou Nguesso to power or following the 2016 – 2018 conflict in the Pool region. Unlike some of its neighbors, Congo has made little effort to address ethnoregional tensions or reintegrate former rebel forces. The 2017 cease-fire between the government and Ninja rebels led to disarmament in 2018, but little has been done since to provide compensation or tackle the underlying divisions and grievances. While ethnoregional tensions persist, recent election cycles have not been marked by significant violence, and clashes between government forces and rebel groups have been minimal.

Reconciliation

2



17 | International Cooperation

The Republic of the Congo has historically maintained close ties with international partners and creditors, including the World Bank, the IMF, China, Russia, France, the United States and the European Union. These relationships have provided critical assistance in times of crisis, but during the current review period moderate economic growth and a declining debt burden have reduced the government's incentive to seek support that might require structural reforms. Discussions on debt restructuring with foreign creditors remain ongoing and are expected to help sustain the downward trend in the debt burden.

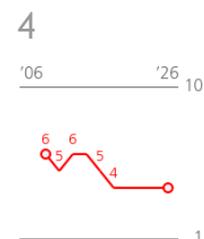
In November 2024, an IMF mission reported progress on policy measures to accelerate fiscal consolidation and advance structural reforms. At the same time, the IMF urged the government to pursue further reforms, including strengthening debt and public financial management, improving transparency and governance, and advancing economic diversification.

Despite some improvements, the Republic of the Congo remains in debt distress, which continues to obstruct long-term development. Government strategies for development and engagement with international partners remain largely short-term in focus, driven by immediate fiscal pressures and the country's dependence on global oil markets.

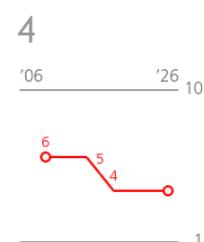
The government in the Republic of the Congo makes rhetorical commitments to major international partners such as the UN, IMF and AU but generally fails to act as a reliable partner when these commitments conflict with regime interests. As in previous review periods, the government has deepened ties with other autocratic regimes, including China and Russia, through increased military cooperation. At the same time, traditional Western partners such as France have seen their influence decline, reducing external pressure on Congo to address corruption, diversify the economy or strengthen multiparty democracy.

Despite some improvements in economic conditions, major credit rating agencies continue to assess the country with caution. In its most recent review in November 2024, Standard & Poor's rated the Republic of the Congo at CCC+ with a stable outlook, revised from negative in October 2024. Moody's rated the country Caa2 with a stable outlook. Both ratings represent a decline compared with the previous BTI review period.

Effective use of support



Credibility



The political leadership under Denis Sassou Nguesso has actively pursued cooperative relationships with the Republic of the Congo's five neighbors – the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR), Gabon, Angola and Cameroon – and has frequently engaged in multilateral and regional agreements with them. Sassou Nguesso has historically maintained especially close ties with Gabon, another former territory of French Equatorial Africa. His daughter married former Gabonese president Omar Bongo, though the fall of the Bongo regime may alter this relationship. Sassou Nguesso has also cultivated particularly strong connections with Angola, which supported his return to power during the 1997 – 1999 civil war. He has consistently sought leading roles in regional bodies such as CEMAC and the Economic Community of Central African States (CEEAC), using these platforms to project influence and reinforce his legitimacy. Shared dependence on oil and other extractive industries has further aligned Congo's interests with those of its neighbors.

Regional financial institutions, including the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the Regional Development Bank of Central African States (BDEAC), remain active but are less significant than larger international partners. Congo is a signatory to several regional and international environmental agreements, most notably the Paris Agreement and accords to protect the Congo River basin shared with DRC. Despite limited regulation and weak transparency, the country remains formally in good standing with these frameworks.

While CAR, DRC and Cameroon continue to pose potential risks of conflict spillover and refugee inflows, tensions along the borders have generally eased. The 2023 coup in Gabon has not yet destabilized the relationship, and the risk of spillover remains low. Congo continues to participate in peacekeeping operations in CAR and elsewhere and has generally fulfilled its core obligations under regional and international security agreements, including integrating refugees and avoiding significant conflict with neighbors.

Regional cooperation

6



Strategic Outlook

Under Denis Sassou Nguesso's rule, the Republic of the Congo has remained a highly corrupt and personalistic state, where most citizens see little benefit from the country's status as one of Africa's major oil exporters. Nearly half the population lives in poverty, while Sassou Nguesso and his inner circle disproportionately profit from state and SOE revenues as well as privileged access to key positions. Growth in both oil and non-oil sectors has driven a modest economic recovery and eased the debt burden, yet the country remains in debt distress with no clear strategy for diversification, transparency or equitable investment of resources. Although the agricultural sector has recorded some growth, rising youth unemployment during the review period underscores the lack of real opportunities available to most Congolese citizens.

The UN, AU, IMF and World Bank have all criticized the Congolese government for poor economic management and limited social progress. Yet even during periods of recovery and declining debt, such as the current one, the government has shown little willingness to adapt or respond to popular demands. The development of a market economy and multiparty democracy has been slow at best, while economic and social benefits remain heavily concentrated. Ethnoregional cleavages continue to drive inequality, with southern populations largely excluded from power and resources. These dynamics have deepened distrust and reinforced a sense of exclusion among most citizens, leaving them highly vulnerable to the combined pressures of climate change, epidemics, poverty and inadequate basic services, even as Sassou Nguesso and his allies benefit disproportionately and prioritize their own interests.

From this context, three strategic recommendations emerge:

- 1) Diversify the economy and expand social services. Nearly half the population continues to live in poverty despite moderate GDP growth and a declining debt burden. To ensure broader access to economic opportunities, the government must not only strengthen the subsistence and agricultural sectors, on which most citizens depend, but also promote diversification across other industries. Equally critical is the expansion of basic services – health, education, water and sanitation – to lay the foundation for inclusive socioeconomic development.
- 2) Strengthen regulation and transparency. The absence of effective regulation and oversight, particularly in the extractive industries, has distorted the distribution of resources and aggravated the health and environmental costs of economic activity. While the government has made rhetorical commitments to reform, meaningful progress requires institutional mechanisms capable of weakening entrenched clientelism and corruption. Without structural improvements in transparency and accountability, growth will continue to benefit elites while social and economic conditions stagnate.
- 3) Broaden political participation and protect civic space. The government's repression of opposition groups and civil society, compounded by ethnoregional favoritism, has left much of the population excluded from political and economic life. Genuine development requires greater inclusion of vulnerable groups in decision-making and an end to the use of intimidation and violence as political tools. Respecting human rights, allowing dissent and broadening representation are essential steps to restore trust and give all Congolese citizens a voice in shaping the country's future.