

Mr. Omar Bongo Ondimba,  
President of the Gabonese Republic

Dear Mr. President,

On the occasion of your re-election to the Gabonese presidency, ARTICLE 19 would like to encourage you to take action to protect and guarantee freedom of expression and information in Gabon.

In 1986, Gabon ratified the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, wherein Article 9 guarantees freedom of expression. Article 1 of the 1991 Gabonese Constitution guarantees this right in the following terms: "Freedom of conscience, thought, opinion, expression, communication, religious practice are guaranteed to all, subject to the respect of public order."

However, despite the existence of a national communication council, these provisions prove to be insufficient to guarantee real freedom of expression.

ARTICLE 19 is particularly concerned with the following issues: public media outlets are actually state-run and therefore not independent of political authorities, private media houses are regularly suspended, as demonstrated by the closure of the newspaper "Nku'u Le Messenger" last August; defamation is still considered a criminal offence, in contradiction with international standards and best practices; legal provisions guaranteeing equal access to information have yet to be established.

For example, during the recent election campaign, several opposition candidates were barred from campaigning and citizens were denied access to information essential to the course of legitimate democratic elections.

Given that several African countries have now passed legislation on access to information (South Africa, Uganda), ARTICLE 19 urges you to adopt similar measures. Ensuring the respect of freedom of expression and guaranteeing equal access to information are necessary to the workings of a democracy.

We therefore call on you to take action in these areas by:

- \* Ending the censorship currently impeding the private media and dissident voices;
- \* Tolerating criticism and decriminalizing defamation;
- \* Establishing legal provisions that recognize and guarantee equal access to information;
- \* Transferring state-run media houses to the public sector.

Our organization is at your disposal to support these implementation efforts.

Sincerely,

Agnès Callamard  
Executive Director

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers'



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