

Violence accompanies sham election in Togo

Brian Smith
11 May 2005

Following the death of Togo's dictator Gnassingbé Eyadema in early February, the United States and the European Union attempted to hold the country up as a test case of a new democratic world order in which the West steps back and allows Africans (and others) to police themselves.

Western governments and the media have portrayed ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States), and to a lesser extent the African Union (AU), as having independently pressured Togo onto a democratic path, following an attempted coup by the late Eyadema's son, Faure Gnassingbé.

This democratic façade masks massive pressure exerted by the West on Togo and on all African governments to fall into line or face the consequences. The actions of the Bush administration in particular are intended to reinforce the myth that, following the 9/11 attacks on the US, Washington is promoting democracy around the world as part of a "war on tyranny."

Gnassingbé Eyadema was Africa's longest serving head of state, having ruled Togo for 38 years, when he suffered a fatal heart attack on February 5. His constitutional successor, National Assembly president Fambaré Ouattara Natchaba, was on a commercial flight from Europe when the news broke. This allowed the Togolese military's chief of staff, General Zachari Nandja, to move swiftly and declare Faure as his father's successor "in order to avoid a power vacuum." All borders were closed, forcing Natchaba's flight to divert to neighbouring Benin.

French President Jacques Chirac, a close friend of Eyadema, warned the Togolese elite that the law should be observed. Retrospective constitutional changes were subsequently sought from the National Assembly to give an air of legality to the proceedings.

ECOWAS leaders initially appeared ready to embrace Faure as the new president, in line with tradition. But within days, they echoed the United States and the European Union in condemning his actions as a coup. President Olusegun Obasanjo summoned Faure to Nigeria. Ostensibly representing the African Union, but in fact acting on behalf of the US and the Western powers, Obasanjo read Faure the

riot act and threatened sanctions unless he reinstated the constitution and arranged for elections in Togo within 60 days.

The US State Department also issued a press release stating, "The US does not accept as legitimate the designation of Gnassingbé as interim president and calls for him to step aside immediately."

Faure subsequently stood down, promising elections, and became the ruling party's presidential candidate.

A Western diplomat quoted on the United Nations' IRIN web site commented on Faure's climb down: "The irony is Faure is an educated reformer and the sort of guy you would want in power if he was democratically elected."

Faure has a degree in administration from Paris and a master's degree in business administration from the US, and he is committed to implementing pro-Western free market policies.

Togolese politics and society are dominated by Eyadema's Kabiye tribe from northern Togo, which also makes up around 80 percent of the military, despite representing only about 13 percent of the country's 5.6 million people. Having dominated Togolese politics for 38 years, the Kabiye elite fears a settling of accounts if it loses its grip on power. If genuinely free elections were permitted, power would inevitably shift towards tribes in the South, predominantly the Ewe.

Togo is a very poor country with a per-capita annual income of only \$270—half what it was in the 1980s. However, the elite has prospered during this period. The capital Lome serves as an Atlantic port for several impoverished landlocked neighbours, and the Togolese government has made a fortune from duties on the goods passing through the port and also from the country's export of cotton and phosphates (it is the world's fourth largest producer of the mineral).

Faure himself became Minister of Public Works, Mines, Post and Telecommunications in 2002, overseeing access to lucrative contracts in telecommunications as well as phosphates and oil exploration that are Togo's main source of foreign exchange earnings. Two of Eyadema's other sons maintain influential positions in the military and in the

government. The Eyadema family fortune was estimated at \$170 million in 1991 and is presumably much higher now.

Eyadema's rule was oppressive, marked by violence and corruption. Elections that took place were inevitably regarded as fraudulent, and outspoken opposition to the domination of the Kabiye elite was not tolerated. Those who resisted were often killed or forced to flee. Unrest following elections in the early 1990s was put down with the aid of France, the former colonial power, which maintained close ties with the old regime.

France has followed the US and EU line on the present elections, but commentators expect the Paris-Lome connection to continue. French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier attended Eyadema's funeral, and French diplomats met with a delegation of the country's generals in Paris, as well as a group of Togolese opposition leaders in Lome in early March.

France fears that the end of Eyadema's rule may lead to a civil war situation, similar to the one that developed in Ivory Coast. It is thus refraining from openly criticising the elite's handling of the election crisis for fear of encouraging the opposition forces.

Elizabeth Byrs of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs also expressed concern about the crisis developing along the lines of the one in the Ivory Coast. "A protracted crisis in Togo could further weaken the fragile economic and social conditions in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger that had been already seriously hit by the crisis in Cote d'Ivoire," she warned.

Sporadic violence and intimidation of opposition supporters marked the April election. Around 100 people died and hundreds more were wounded during the campaign and its aftermath. The EU and the US declined to send observers, relying instead on ECOWAS, which dispatched around 150 monitors.

ECOWAS reported that, despite some violence and irregularities, the election was largely fair. The French foreign minister also declared a satisfactory poll. However, a number of human rights organisations reported widespread election fraud including "ghost" voters, ballot box stuffing, intimidation by security forces and the forced removal of the opposition's election-monitoring computers.

The election was contested primarily between Faure and 74-year-old Emmanuel Bob-Akitani, who was representing a coalition of opposition groups. The main opposition leader, Gilchrist Olympio, was barred from standing as he lives in exile in Paris. Several opposition leaders are reportedly uncomfortable with Olympio, the son of Togo's first president, Sylvanus Olympio, who was overthrown in the coup that ultimately brought Eyadema to power. He is perceived as an elitist and an outsider—his family hails from

Brazil.

Following the vote and before the provisional declaration of results, Faure was once again summoned to Nigeria—this time along with Olympio. The two protagonists were "encouraged," whatever the outcome of the poll, to agree to form a government of national reconciliation as the best means of heading off civil war and maintaining regional stability. Both sides appeared to agree to this demand, though Olympio denied it the following day when it seemed possible that the opposition had won.

Post-election violence was expected, and the interior minister was sacked during the campaign for suggesting that civil war might ensue unless the poll were delayed. Violence erupted within minutes of the provisional declaration of Faure as winner. Widespread looting was accompanied by attacks on homes and businesses owned by French citizens and other foreigners, who were widely perceived as having benefited from Eyadema's rule. A German cultural centre was also attacked, probably by the ruling party's militia, as Germany had criticised the February coup.

The violence was also fuelled by losing candidate Bob-Akitani who, having provisionally received 38 percent of the vote to Faure's 60 percent, announced in a statement: "Togolese, your president is speaking to you. Yes, your president. We have not lost this presidential election.... We must fight with our lives if necessary."

Whilst protests have been directed against Faure, *Reuters* reports there is also widespread disillusionment with the opposition. One protester declared, "We don't like things as they are but we are scared. We are the ones who bear the brunt all the time, not our opposition leaders sitting comfortably in their homes."

The UN High Commission for Refugees reports that more than 20,000 people have fled across the borders into neighbouring Ghana and Benin following street clashes between opposition supporters and the security forces. Most of the refugees appear to be from the opposition strongholds around Lome.

The opposition will probably be forced to succumb to pressure from the West to join a national unity government. But whether or not an agreement is reached, instability is likely to continue, despite the efforts of imperialism to impose a "democratic" solution.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact