

# Tensions over Togo election

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17 March 2010

Demonstrators took to the streets of Togo's capital, Lomé, in West Africa last weekend to protest the recent election results. The election returned the incumbent president Faure Gnassingbé to power in this former French colony.

Gnassingbé won an overwhelming majority, with around 1.2 million or 60 percent of the vote. His nearest rival, Jean-Pierre Fabre of the Union of Forces for Change (UFC), received around 690,000 votes or 34 percent of the ballot.

Thousands of people fled the country in the run up to the election, anticipating violence. A Norwegian Council for Africa report quoted Patrick Nicholson of the Catholic NGO CARITAS, stating, "People have already started leaving Togo for Benin, perhaps as a precaution."

The same report noted that the UN Refugee agency had prepared an emergency plan should thousands of Togolese move to seek shelter in Benin.

Gnassingbé was first elected as president in 2005 and his re-election begins his second term. Gnassingbé's father, Eyadéma, died in February 2005. He had been Togo's head of state for 38 years, having initially seized power in a military coup in 1967 and dissolving all political parties. His rule was marked by violence, corruption and a complete disregard for human rights. He hung on to power despite an attempted coup in 1985, when French troops intervened to save him.

Following Gnassingbé senior's death, the military appointed his son Faure in his place. However, following pressure from the United States and European Union, an election was held in 2005 that confirmed Faure Gnassingbé as president. The election was marred by violence in which around 500 people were killed and around 40,000 Togolese left the country for neighbouring Ghana and Benin.

The current election appears to have passed off

peacefully in comparison to the previous one, when soldiers burst into polling stations and stole ballot boxes. The European Union Election Observation Mission (EOM) had monitors present. There were also monitors from the African Union and the from the West Africa economic co-operation group ECOWAS. A report from the EOM released at the weekend claimed there was no evidence of vote tampering or ballot stuffing.

The UFC claim that there was ballot rigging. They have alleged that whilst some ballot paper stubs had serial numbers, the actual ballot papers did not. These numberless ballot papers could be used to stuff ballot boxes elsewhere.

Even the generally favourable EOM report pointed out that ruling party appeared to have bought votes by handing out rice. Gnassingbé's Rally of the Togolese People Party did not deny giving out rice, saying it had been donated by businessmen sympathetic to the party. The areas where the rice was distributed saw a high turnout that favoured Gnassingbé.

An *Africa Confidential* report of February this year noted opposition "complaints that the electoral register has been inflated in favour of the RPT"—Gnassingbé's party. Also Togo's election commission (CENI) had barred two opposition leaders, Gilchrist Olympio and Kofi Yamgnane, from standing in the presidential elections.

Gilchrist Olympio was barred because it was alleged that he had improperly filled in a health certificate. He is the son of Sylvanus Olympio, who Eyadéma Gnassingbé killed in 1963.

Following intervention by the president of Burkina Faso's president, Blaise Compaore, CENI responded by moving the election date from February 28 to March 4. The opposition's "complaints about inflated registers in the north, verification procedures and a second round of voting" went unanswered.

There was a vast imbalance of money between the campaigns. Gnassingbé's posters greatly outnumbered those of the opposition. He attempted to distance himself from his father's regime by using only his first name.

In opposition strongholds, such as Lomé, turnout was low. The opposition claims its supporters felt intimidated, being mindful of the violence meted out by Gnassingbé supporters following the 2005 election. United Nations and Amnesty International investigations concluded that those who died then were killed because of their opposition to Gnassingbé.

Jean-Pierre Fabre of the UFC says he will continue to protest the result of the election. The UFC plans to form an alternative government. He told reporters, "We are going to make them exhaust their stock of tear gas. We cannot let this go on, otherwise they'll hang on to power for the next 200 years."

Togo is an immensely poor country. It ranks 159 out of 182 countries, according to human development indices. Half the population lives on less than \$1.25 a day. The gross domestic product per capita is \$240 compared to a sub-Saharan average of \$580. Life expectancy is only 63 years. Some 22 percent of children under five suffer from malnutrition.

The country is heavily indebted. In 2008, the Paris Club of creditors agreed to cancel \$347 million of Togo's debt. At the same time, however, Togo received a \$108.4 million loan from the IMF and \$170 million from the World Bank in order to pay the arrears on an earlier debt of \$150 million and increasing its overall indebtedness in the process. It will not receive complete debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries scheme until it complies with the terms of an IMF Structural Adjustment Programme.

Togo is primarily an agricultural country, but it has large reserves of phosphates and as yet unexploited offshore oil reserves. Phosphate production has fallen from a peak in 1997, as the more accessible deposits have been mined out. Togo's main importance is as a regional trading centre. Lomé is a port city, which is a gateway for goods to and from the landlocked countries of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

The aim of the IMF and the World Bank is to open up these resources to international investment while ensuring that the local elite cannot take too large a share of the profits. China is also seeking to increase its

influence in Togo as in many other African countries and has provided soft loans to the government.

It may be that the West will accept a flawed election in return for maintaining their dominant role in Togo. Relations with France became strained last year when Togo expelled Eric Bosc, the first secretary at the French embassy in Togo. The French reciprocated by expelling a Togolese diplomat from Paris. News reports state the Togolese considered Bosc was cultivating a close relationship with Kofi Yamgnane, then an opposition presidential candidate. Yamgnane has dual French/Togolese citizenship and had served as French junior minister in the 1990s. The French government denied Bosc had had any improper contact with opposition politicians.



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