

# Mass demonstrations in Togo threaten to topple ruling government

Eddie Haywood  
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On Wednesday and again on Thursday, tens of thousands of Togolese poured into the streets of cities across the West African nation demanding the ruling government of Faure Gnassingbe resign immediately. The numbers of protesters are unprecedented; initial figures reported in the media indicate that at least 100,000 turned out in 10 cities around the country on Wednesday.

The demonstrations were organized by the Pan-African National Party (PNP) and the National Alliance for Change (ANC) to call for the immediate release of party members imprisoned by the government. But the demonstrations took on a revolutionary dimension with the crowds expressing popular contempt for the government with widespread calls for the Gnassingbe regime to resign.

Lomé, Togo's capital city, saw the largest convergence of protests. Banners were waved with the words "Faure Must Go!" and "50 Years Is Long Enough!" a reference to the dynastic character of the Gnassingbe government.

Social anger reached a fever pitch in August when two protesters were killed by police during demonstrations against the Gnassingbe government organized by the opposition party of Jean-Pierre Fabre, the National Alliance for Change (ANC). Many were beaten and assaulted with teargas, with others arrested and jailed.

The protests have struck a chord of terror within the Gnassingbe government. Recalling the mass demonstrations in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011 that saw the hated dictators of both countries swept from power, the wave of large scale demonstrations currently in Togo have shook the very foundations of the Gnassingbe government.

Recognizing the massive threat to its continued

existence in the wave of popular outrage, the Gnassingbe government is desperate to put an end to the demonstrations.

Public service minister and government spokesperson Gilbert Bawara announced on Wednesday that the government had moved to limit Internet access nationwide for "security" purposes. Internet as well as mobile text messaging and money transfer networks were completely down by Thursday.

In an effort to assuage popular anger the Gnassingbe government has promised to introduce legislation in October that would call for limits to two terms for the presidency. In the unlikely event this meaningless reform was made law and enforced, Gnassingbe would remain in power for another three years, leaving office in 2020.

Togo is among the poorest countries in the world, with more than 80 percent of the rural poor living on less than \$2 a day while a tiny layer at the top enjoy obscene privilege at the expense of these impoverished masses.

The social anger which has erupted in mass demonstrations has been kindled for decades by the dictatorial and dynastic government. The Gnassingbe family has ruled Togo for half a century.

In 1967, Faure Gnassingbe's father, Etienne Gnassingbe Eyadema, took power after he staged a coup against the government of Nicolas Grunitzky. His nearly four-decade rule was one of the longest in Africa.

Eyadema's political trajectory paralleled the path of many post-colonial African autocrats. In 1953 during French colonial rule, Eyadema joined the army, rising to the rank of sergeant. While in the army during the decade of the 1950s, he fought on behalf of France in its bloody colonial wars conducted against Indochina

and Algeria.

After he assumed power, Eyadema enjoyed the backing of France and other European governments, including Washington. Like other newly independent governments coming to power in Africa's post-colonial era, Eyadema's government sought to continue undisturbed the capitalist operations established in Togo under the colonial administration.

The Eyadema government was characterized by corruption, nepotism and authoritarianism. The government held a series of allegedly democratic elections, now widely regarded as rigged, at various times throughout Eyadema's 38-year rule.

Upon taking power, Eyadema decreed his party, Rally of the Togolese People (RPT), as the only legal political organization allowed in the country. A rabid anticommunist, he targeted political enemies with accusations of having close ties to the Soviet Union.

In 1993, after feeling international pressure over his regime's gross human rights violations, Eyadema attempted to give his regime a veneer of democratic legitimacy by allowing other parties to campaign for elections held that year. These reforms were largely farcical, and the fraudulent character of these "elections" was revealed when Eyadema was declared the winner in every single election afterwards.

Following Eyadema's death in 2005 of health complications while on a plane bound to Tunisia for medical treatment, the remaining government in Lomé appointed his son, Faure Gnassingbe, as the new president.

When the Togolese masses poured into the streets in revolt at this blatant establishment of dynastic succession, Faure Gnassingbe felt compelled to hold elections. Not surprising to the Togolese masses, Gnassingbe was declared the winner.

International election observers, barred by the government from monitoring the election, strongly suspected the ballot was rigged. During protests against the regime's dynastic machinations, 500 people were killed by security forces.

An element of dread no doubt haunts the minds of the Togolese ruling elite and Western capitalists regarding the potential for the collapse of the Gnassingbe government and its effect on their capitalist operations and banking enterprises in Togo in the wake of the mass demonstrations.

Washington displayed its "scramble for Africa" strategy in August, when it sent representatives of the Trump administration to attend the annual African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) trade forum held in Lomé. AGOA was enacted in 2000 by the Clinton administration, to better facilitate trade between the United States and Africa.

When asked by the media regarding President Donald Trump's position on Africa, US State Department spokesman Brian Neubert, who was present at the forum, said that Washington has "very significant interests in Africa."

Speaking further, Neubert elaborated on Washington's imperialist aims for Africa, "There are opportunities for American investors in several sectors. For example, in the energy sector—the opportunities are enormous."

Wednesday's demonstrations make clear the establishment is petrified of the Togolese masses, and the ruling elite is desperate to contain the social outrage. Calculating the implications of a collapse of the Gnassingbe government, the ruling class is attempting to forge an alliance with the political opposition in a combined effort to channel the restive masses down the fraudulent avenue of constitutional reforms of presidential term limits.

On Wednesday, the Gnassingbe government demonstrated its eagerness to make a political alliance with the PNP and ANC by releasing several PNP and ANC figures it held in prison.

The fraudulent political parties behind the organization of the demonstrations represent a faction of the Togolese capitalist elite, and seek to take undeserved political advantage of the mass social anger towards the dynastic regime and channel it into a political campaign to assume power for themselves. The election of either the PNP or ANC would not improve the miserable conditions of life experienced by the Togolese masses.



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