

THE DYNASTIC SUCCESSION IN TOGO

Continental and regional implications

PAUL SIMON HANDY

Introduction

The presidential poll that took place in Togo on 24 April 2005 was certainly not a model of transparency. On the contrary, it consecrated a dynastic succession and deepened the societal divide in a country that has suffered 38 years of autocratic rule.

The role played by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) in Togo has raised a series of questions which suggest the limitations of a wholly African management system for governments in peril. The poorly prepared monitoring of the elections in Togo by ECOWAS and its assessment of the poll as generally free and fair have somewhat undermined its credibility. Yet in other instances, most notably in conflict management, the organisation has proved its ability to intervene in a constructive way. In another sense, one could argue that an opportunity has been lost: since Togo is a small country, with limited strategic importance, the regional and sub-regional organisations could have made it an example of their determination to solve the kind of political crisis into which Togo was plunged. Similar situations might occur elsewhere in the continent in the future.

Togo under Eyadéma: A long tradition of spurious reforms and electoral manipulation

Supporters of Eyadéma in the army and the Rally of the Togolese People (RPT), the sole

political party during his rule, will defend his record by pointing to the numerous mediation efforts he made to help solve a number of crises in West African countries (for example Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone). On the other hand, Eyadéma's involvement in external conflicts was often regarded by his critics as a move to distract attention from the disastrous political, economic and social situation into which the country has ineluctably drifted since the 1980s. There is a vast discrepancy between the official image of Eyadéma as the mediator in violent conflicts affecting neighbouring countries and the internal Togolese reality – where he was a military dictator who controlled an extremely repressive government apparatus. The tension between the official rhetoric and the hardships caused by the harshness of his regime were characteristic of Eyadéma's rule.

Viewed from this perspective, the attempt of the army to impose an unconstitutional succession on Togo was typical of Eyadéma's style of government, in which the basic mechanisms were suppression of dissent and containment of democratic reform. When the democratisation process began in 1990 in neighbouring Benin, threatening to reach Togo, Eyadéma's days in power seemed numbered. Nevertheless, under the pressure of the international community (especially France), various democratic reforms were introduced by the National Conference (in July and August 1991) in an attempt to open

up the political system. To some, this appeared to augur the dawn of a new political era in Togo.

A prime minister chosen from civil society was appointed and a legislative organ was created to design a new constitution. The position of head of state was downgraded to that of a merely representative figure. However, drawing on his control of the army, Eyadéma reclaimed the power he had lost through a strategy which observers termed a 'putsch by instalments'.

The repression of political forces opposing the government party that followed reached a climax when several prominent personalities were assassinated. An attempt was made in 1991 to eliminate Gilchrist Olympio, the president's most important opponent and the son of the first president of the country, Sylvanus Olympio.^[52] Although Olympio found asylum in Ghana and France, he was barred from taking part in subsequent presidential elections on the grounds that he had been living abroad for more than 12 months. Eyadéma's rule of terror also forced many Togolese to flee to neighbouring countries such as Benin and Ghana.

Between 1993 and 2003, Eyadéma organised three presidential polls of dubious credibility. It should be recalled that his candidacy in the last of these elections was only made possible by a constitutional amendment that allowed the president to serve more than two terms. Not surprisingly, the refusal of the Togolese government under Eyadéma to implement the governance reforms requested by the donor community and the persistent manipulation of presidential and legislative elections caused the European Community to suspend its development cooperation in 1993. In fact, the death of Eyadéma occurred at a crucial moment, because his government had just begun talks with the EU in the hope of ending Togo's long isolation and resuming cooperation.

The troubling failure of African organisations to manage the crisis

Although rumours of Eyadéma's ill health had been circulating in Togo and the region

for several months before his death, the surprise expressed by Eyadéma's entourage when he died indicates how unprepared his supporters were for such an eventuality. After the presidential election in 2003, Eyadéma had started to groom Faure Gnassingbé, his eldest son, as his successor. Legislative elections planned for the end of 2005 were meant to secure Gnassingbé's appointment as Speaker of Parliament.

However, Eyadéma's sudden death radically altered these calculations – and the subsequent events are well known. The army moved quickly and on 6 February the chief of staff of the army swore allegiance to Faure Gnassingbé, pronouncing him the new head of state. In doing this, the army overrode the provisions of the constitution, which call for the Speaker of Parliament to take over if the president dies while in office. The officers took advantage of the absence of the Speaker, who was abroad at the time, to appoint Faure Gnassingbé, aiming at a *fait accompli* which they thought would be tolerated by the international community.

Strong diplomacy at the beginning of the crisis

While President Jacques Chirac was still looking for an appropriate diplomatic formula to honour the memory of Eyadéma as a "personal friend and a friend of France", the chairman of the AU Commission, Alpha Oumar Konaré, was describing the events in Togo as a military coup which he was not prepared to accept. This unusual statement from the executive chief of the AU was seconded by the current chairman of the AU, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo. The president of ECOWAS, Mamadou Tandja of Niger, also announced his intention not to recognise the new government. He suggested that the country return to the constitutional order.

The determination of African leaders to oppose the action of the Togolese army led countries outside Africa to condemn the coup in Togo and to call for properly conducted presidential elections. The imposition of sanctions on the new government in Lomé by ECOWAS was seen as a logical extension of

the body's commitment to restoring order in Togo.

The resignation of Faure Gnassingbé three weeks after his appointment by the army must therefore be attributable to the efforts of African diplomacy. After a meeting with President Obasanjo in Abuja, Eyadéma's son agreed to step down and to arrange for elections to be held within the timeframe stipulated by the constitution. ECOWAS promised to observe the electoral process to ensure the fairness and transparency of the poll. On grounds of the shortness of the notice, the EU did not send observers, but it gave financial assistance to the ECOWAS mission.

A conciliatory attitude with the regime during the transition

The country's opposition parties welcomed the return to the constitutional order, and even set their divisions aside to nominate a sole candidate, Bob Akitani of the *Union des Forces du Changement* (the UFC, the party of Olympio). Nevertheless, opposition parties strongly protested against the timeframe set for the elections, which allowed merely 60 days for campaigning, as well as the unpreparedness of the authorities to ensure a fair election process. One of the greatest points of contention was the disorder of the existing electoral rolls.

Although several appeals were made for the postponement of the election, these were ignored by both the interim government and ECOWAS. Even the dramatic resignation two days before the poll of the RPT Minister of the Interior, François Eso Boko, who was in charge of the organisation of the election, did not seem to deter ECOWAS observers. Arguing that the conditions for a transparent and fair election could not be met, Boko, a former protégé of Eyadéma, called for a postponement of the poll for at least one year. He was forced to seek refuge in the German Embassy to escape the army, which wanted to try him for treason.

That the election was held on 24 April was a sign of the determination of the ruling party to move quickly. When the Electoral Commission announced the victory of Faure

Gnassingbé with 60.8% of the votes (with 38% for Bob Akitani), urban violence erupted spontaneously in Lomé and other cities. The heavy-handed response to the protest by the security forces is said to have caused more than 100 deaths. Some 20,000 Togolese fled to Benin and Ghana as a result.

What was most surprising was not the designation of Faure Gnassingbé as the winner of the polls, but the euphemistic assessment of the electoral process by ECOWAS, which described it as basically fair, while conceding that a few irregularities had taken place. In the same vein, the former colonial power, France, which had retained strong ties with Eyadéma's family since 1967, expressed its satisfaction, while the European Commission merely 'took note'. The US, however, questioned the legitimacy of the presidential election. Yet even if they were not satisfied with the way in which the election had been conducted, the EU Commission and the US called on the new government to begin a dialogue with the opposition in order to bring about national reconciliation.

Taking a tougher line, the EU parliament expressed its strong opposition to the new dispensation in Lomé. A resolution adopted on 11 May states:

[T]he circumstances in which recent elections were held did not comply with the principles of transparency, pluralism and the freedom of the people to determine their own future, principles which were guaranteed by the relevant regional and international instruments, and that the legitimacy of the authorities established on the basis of these elections may not be acknowledged.

The extreme divergence between the verdicts of ECOWAS and France on the one side and Togo's other international partners on the other poses a series of questions.

Conclusion

After a violent transition, a manipulated election and a military power base that has been reinforced, what can the political future hold for Togo? The deep division between the

great majority of people (mostly in the south) and the small, privileged elite in the north can hardly be bridged by any formulaic government of national unity headed by Faure Gnassingbé. Although this solution is backed by ECOWAS and some important actors outside Africa, such as the US and the EU Commission, the feeling in Togolese opposition parties and civil society organisations is that a great opportunity to make fundamental reforms in the political life of the country has been lost. ECOWAS in particular has failed to earn moral credit because it has not been perceived as a neutral party. Even before the poll, the opposition parties were accusing ECOWAS of tacitly supporting the candidature of Gnassingbé by closing their eyes to the massive irregularities in the electoral process.

From a normative perspective, the West African organisation did not honour its commitment to fostering good governance. As the only organisation officially accredited to observe the election process in Togo, ECOWAS had a responsibility that it did little to fulfil. It sent only 150 electoral observers, most of whom were deployed only a few days before the poll took place. Therefore they were unable to make an adequate assessment of the preparations for the elections. The final report produced by ECOWAS underplayed the extent of irregularities that occurred during the poll (such as the confiscation of ballots by soldiers and the falsification of voting cards), and therefore failed to fulfil the requirements of impartiality.

The leaders of ECOWAS apparently opted for a pragmatic solution to the Togolese crisis, preferring political continuity (as symbolised by Eyadéma's son) to political change (as represented by the opposition leaders, some of whom are known for their radical views). The country and the subregion. But this eventuality might have been assessed as too risky by West African leaders, at a time that Côte d'Ivoire is still not out of danger.

The reasons for the choice made by ECOWAS are manifold. The first can be found in the national politics of Togo. The military-ethnic nature of Eyadéma's regime and the power of his successor to mobilise huge resources (in the form of coercion,

money and strong internal and external support) make it difficult for opposition leaders to take over. Again, the great majority of army officers come from Eyadéma's home region, and the army retains its power over the country's political fortunes. A president from the opposition would certainly not have total control of the army. The second reason might have to do with the personality of the opposition's leaders, some of whom are thought to be too radical, a factor Eyadéma knows how to exploit politically. Also, Eyadéma's family has many friends and important diplomatic ties in the West African region.

Another reason for ECOWAS' preference for the status quo may spring from the current situation in West Africa. Owing to the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire, the port of Abidjan is no longer able to play the role of main sea port for the region. Landlocked countries such as Burkina Faso and Niger (whose president is the chair of ECOWAS) are increasingly using the port of Lomé as an alternative. A sudden political change in Lomé could have a direct effect on their imports and exports, which is why some West African countries may prefer continuity.

Last but not least, it is hard to imagine that France did not support the candidacy of Eyadéma's son. France was the only Western country that failed to condemn the unconstitutional coup; it was also the sole member of the international community to back the ECOWAS declaration that the election result was legitimate. Its great influence in the region, especially on the Francophone countries, must also have played an important role. Because France is Togo's most important partner, its unconditional support of Eyadéma's regime has complicated, once again, the position of the EU in the country.

By maintaining the status quo at the price of a flawed election, ECOWAS chose to uphold an obsolete conception of stability. It could be argued that the sub-regional organisation did not expect free and fair elections in Togo in the first place – the realpolitik approach it adopted may have been based on the argument that a gradual opening of the political system in Togo was the best option on offer, because a sudden regime change in the face of a hostile

army would have been disastrous. The current expectation of most leaders in the region is that the parliamentary elections to be held later this year will give Gilchrist Olympio the chance to take his place in the domestic political scene. Even so, the political signal sent to other countries, which may consider similar solutions to their own succession dilemmas, was the wrong one. As for the AU, its silence following the strong commitment made by President Konaré at the beginning of the crisis could be taken to suggest the AU has also adopted the realist option.

Although it is unlikely that Togo's political fortunes will develop along the lines of those of Côte d'Ivoire, the election of Faure Gnassingbé will not automatically lead to social peace in Togo. To avoid being part of the

problem rather than the solution, ECOWAS should consider recommending a government of national unity only as part of a broader transition process. After a period of transition, fair and transparent general elections should be held under international supervision. A profound dialogue is needed in Togo to assess, among other issues, the excessive influence of the army over political life. As for the opposition, their most important and representative leaders should renounce their everything-but-nothing strategy. By considering the option of cohabitation with the RPT under certain conditions, they would help to calm the boiling political climate. Otherwise, Togo after Eyadéma will simply be a pale copy of Togo under Eyadéma.