



By Wolali Koffi Ahlijah



Political violence has been inherent to the political evolution of Togo since its inception. Although it never erupted in the all-out war and large-scale tragedies that I have often seen across Africa, the West African country has a complicated political story.

A short 3 years after Togo's independence, Sylvanus Olympio, the founding father of Togo, was gunned down at by former soldiers from the colonial army in the first coup ever in sub-Saharan Africa. The author of this assassination eventually seized power in 1967 in what would become, at the time of his death in 2005, the longest reign in Africa.

On August 19th 2017, peaceful demonstrators took to the streets to demand political reforms namely the reinstatement of the 1992 version of the country's constitution. The government responded with tears gas and bullets leaving at least 2 demonstrators dead. By the next day, calm had returned. But many observers have noted that the fragile quietude may just be a precursor to a violent storm.

Repressions

To understand the current political crisis in Togo, one must go back to the origins of the military regime of Gnassingbé Eyadéma. A soldier in the French colonial army, Eyadema spent time in Indochina and Algeria fighting nationalists in these countries and did not return to Togo until after independence. Finding themselves out of a job following the demise of the French colonial empire, Eyadema and his army mates demanded to be part of the newly formed Togolese army.

Togo's accession to independence had been a victory for nationalist forces led by President Olympio.

His party, the Committee for the Unity of Togo (CUT) had struggled hard for the country's freedom from the French colonial empire. Unlike other independence movements across the continent that saw confrontation between the Africans and their colonial masters, Togo's independence contention was mainly between rival groups of Togolese.

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In 1956, Togo had become an autonomous republic within the French Union. The pro-French, led by Prime Minister Nicolas Grunitzky, favored a model that would grant the country greater autonomy as a French territory as they deemed Togo not ready for full statehood. The nationalists, in opposition insisted on nothing less than immediate independence and full statehood. The nationalists won the general elections in 1958, compelling the French to sign an agreement for full independence. On April 27, 1960, Sylvanus Olympio officially declared the independence of the republic of Togo after 80 years of successive German, British and French domination.

It was therefore no surprise that Olympio regarded the demobilized colonial soldiers with contempt and dismissed their request. He saw in their demand, the conniving hands of his former pro-French opponents that were attempting to destabilize his government. It was true at the time that Olympio's government was working to totally break free from France's influence by seeking partners to mint the country's own currency. For him, mercenaries who had fought against freedom fighters had no place in a respectable army. This disagreement led to the coup in 1963 that left Olympio dead and a civilian pro-French government in place.

Eyadema initially moved to place Olympio's rival, Grunitzky, in power. Through political maneuvering, made easier by a climate of social unrest between 1963 and 1967, he managed to seize the power for himself and to grow in strength by clenching an iron fist around the country. He abolished political parties and instituted a single party system, drawing inspiration from North Korea to popularize a personality cult, and looted the country's resources.

He gained praise from the West for stabilizing the country and bringing peace while the reality was that he jailed most of his opponents, kept thousands in exile and simply eliminated dozens of dissidents. Absolute master aboard the ship, Eyadema saw no serious challenge to his power for decades.

After neutralizing all opposition, Eyadema managed the country through a period of relative stability. In the 1970's the country's main export, phosphate, saw a huge surge in price that enabled the government to silence critics and to pass the boom off for economic success. However, by the end of the decade, falling phosphate prices, coupled with poor economic stewardship and the pressures from lenders forced the country down the austerity path of Structural Adjustment Programs.

The imposition of restrictive measures led to cracks within the political apparatus of the single party and dissenting voices, thought to be long-silenced, started to become audible.

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By the late 1980s, Togolese in exile and local dissidents had started to organize. The end of the cold war also created new possibilities as western powers started to be less tolerant of strongmen in Africa. Internal opposition became increasingly bold and defiance started to become common, especially among university students and intellectuals.

The First Uprising

In October 1990, a group of students protested the arrest of a few of their peers for allegedly defaming the president. Such exercise of free speech was a serious offence in the country of Eyadema.

General protests, fueled by the shock and anger caused by the violent response of the military, plunged the country into turmoil. The popularity of the movement that was also flaring up in many African countries resulted in many wins for the opposition.

The student's movement piled pressure on the government, which released the prisoners. It was too late, however as the movement grew in strength, joined by all strata of society, pushing Eyadema to make political overtures including a multi-party system and the holding of a national conference.

Many Togolese came back from exile to participate in the national conference. They formed an alliance of democratic forces working together to keep the momentum through street protests and strikes that were so popular they would bring the country to a standstill. Cornered, and under the watchful eye of his western allies who were now insisting on human rights, Eyadema reluctantly launched the national conference in June 1991.

However, a day later, he and his army walked away from the conference, stating that they were offended by the blatant disrespect by the civilian members of the conference. A few weeks later the president ordered sent in tanks to stop the conference. Intransigent participants refused to leave. They had the support of the western diplomats who also insisted that the move was excessive. The conference concluded under sequester and talks brokered by German, France and US diplomats led to the acceptance of the outcome by Eyadema. The national conference laid the ground for democratic institutions and elected a prime minister to lead a transition to democracy.

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Relations between the transitional bodies and Eyadema were tensed. The army ultimately launched and assault on the prime minister's office, killing dozens and arresting the remaining including the prime minister. Amid the adversity however, one of the key accomplishments of the transition was a referendum on a new constitution that was upheld by 99 percent of voters.

The constitution of 1992 was supposed to be the last stop before the transition of power through a fair a democratic election. It featured a reduction of presidential terms to 5 years (under a previous single party constitution the term was 7 years), the novelty of limiting presidential terms to two consecutive periods, a two-round ballot system, a minimum age of 45 for presidential candidates and the creation of an independent electoral commission,

Eyadema continued taunt the democratic institutions by stirring conflicts with the new institution. In October 1992, the transitional legislative body, the High Council of the Republic, was held hostage for days by the army who assaulted its members. Afterwards, many fled into exile. The upset opposition called for a unlimited general strike until Eyadema resigned from power. The strike

lasted 9 months. Eyadema and the army launched a campaign of terror resulting in massive fleeing of the population, countless arrests and political murders. All foreign partners of Togo including the European Union, France and Germany placed economic sanctions on the country. In 1993, Eyadema organized a presidential election that was boycotted by the opposition. He won unchallenged.

Eyadema used his new "first" term to undo the democratic progress. In 1998, he used the same terror approach to claim victory in an election that most observers deemed unfair. The head of the electoral commission had refused to call the official results and the ministry of the interior, a high ranking member of Eyadema's party, went on public media to declare Eyadema as a winner. The sanctions in place since 1998 were maintained. Many reports placed the opposition flag bearer, Gilchrist Olympio (a son of the first president) as the actual winner.

In 2002, Eyadema and his ruling party, the Rally of the People of Togo (RPT) put the final touches to the dialing back of democracy by revising the constitution to remove term limits, reduce the number of rounds in presidential elections and lower the minimum age for candidates from 45 to 35.

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The Togolese opposition has weakened quickly after starting off as a unified front. The advent of the multiparty system awoke personal ambitions. The Coordination of the Democratic Opposition (COD) that led the charge through the National Conference imploded. Without a clear leader, there was little opportunity for a coherent response. The campaign of terror also took a toll on individual commitment as many resettled in foreign countries, slowing down the momentum.

The Prime Minister of the transition eventually joined Eyadema and started to cooperate with him to move his agenda, As did many of Eyadema's opponents. and the individual reversals had a demoralizing effect. Although very committed, many of the remaining opposition leaders lacked charisma and the single most significant personality, Gilchrist olympio went to stay in exile in Great Britain after being the target of an attack in 1992, that left many of this staffers dead. Consequently, the first uprising failed to carry through the democratic hopes of Togo.

Death of a dinosaur

Hopes of political change reappeared unexpectedly in 2005 when Eyadema died suddenly. But, hours within the official announcement, the army generals appointed Faure Gnassingbe, one of Eyadema's sons as the new president in total violation of the constitution. Local and international pressures compelled Faure to resign a few days later.

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He was declared winner of the election held a couple of months later, causing violent protests around the country. The repression caused at least 500 deaths among civilians according to independent investigations.

The father, and the son

Like his father, Faure used all political tools to clinch his power. He promised reforms and a new way of governing, pitching himself as a bridge between a divided country. In 2006, he signed a comprehensive political agreement with the opposition parties and vowed to implement changes to ensure social peace. Some of the 22 key provisions of the agreement included presidential term limits and a two-round ballot. But the most important gain for the agreement was a rapprochement between Faure Gnassingbe and Gilchrist Olympio, the sons of the two former presidents. Faure Gnassingbe showed this off as a political trophy and seems less interested in any other provision of the agreement. He had succeeded in neutralizing his father's biggest foe, the man who had vowed revenge against his own father's assassin, now seems less committed to the fight for real change.

Renegades

It is important to note the broker of the Togolese Comprehensive Political Agreement was no one other than the president of Burkina Faso who was himself ousted from power by a popular uprising in 2014 as he attempted to remove term limits to remain in power. The early skeptics grew confident as years went by and Faure Gnassingbe went on to start a third controversial term as a president with no sign of political reform. The fragmented opposition was unable to effectively rally around the issue and the population had grown weary of the repression. Democracy has become a dream once more under the rule of the son.

Talks of revolution

During the 2010, election the main political party led by Gilchrist Olympio imploded over personal conflicts. The party split as Gilchrist took an awkward decision not to be involved in the campaign. This led to a weak mobilization that made Faure's re-election fairly easy. Former members of Gilchrist's party went on to create the National Alliance for Change (ANC). They collaborated with other minor opposition parties but their new leader, Jean Pierre Fabre, lacks the charisma of his former mentor, Gilchrist.

Instead of asking for the current texts to be reformed, the PNP is simply demanding the reinstatement of the constitution of 1992 that had been adopted by the people and that included all the necessary guardrails for a free and fair election.

With a second term that was less controversial than the initial one, Faure now feels like a legitimate president. Before him, there were only fragments of the opposition, enough for him to testify that he allows opposition, but too fragmented and ineffective to be any real threat. In 2015, he was elected to a third term in an election that could be qualified as free but not fair, the fairness having to do with the fact that the constitution and the rules are rigged in favor the president's party. Without political reforms and in the absence of term limits, no one else would ever be able to win an election in Togo.

Instead of fighting at the poll, the opposition turned its strategy towards the implementation of political reforms. This issue had been put on hold, as the opposition first believed they could simply win the elections and then make the reforms. Even after this moment of reckoning, there was still no consensus or clear strategy to move toward the reforms. Faure Gnassingbe continues to delay the implementation of the agreement and even the recommendations of groups that he himself commissioned to study the issue.

The lack of a clear strategy resulted in more division within the opposition. A group led by Tikpi

Atchadam, a relatively unknown figure until a few months ago, went on to create the radical Pan African National Party (PNP). Instead of asking for the current texts to be reformed, the PNP is simply demanding the reinstatement of the constitution of 1992 that had been adopted by the people and that included all the necessary guardrails for a free and fair election.

It was largely unexpected that the PNP would be able to gather enough steam to shake the status quo. After calling for its militants to go out and protest on the streets on August 19th, 2017, thousands of red wearing sympathizers flooded the streets in several cities in Togo. The event spread to the Togolese diaspora in Ghana and Germany with hundreds of people demonstrating peacefully in these countries.

The events in Togo took a tragic turn when police fired real bullets into the demonstrators causing human casualties. Unlike in recent years when shots fired and tear gases were enough to disperse the protesters, the marchers faced off with the police in violent clashes. This was amplified by social media with live streaming, videos and updates on WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter.

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After Saturday's protest, the mainstream opposition parties who have been watching the PNP from a safe distance decided to heed the call of Tikpi Atchadam. Suddenly a once fragmented movement marred with personal conflict and a complacent relationship with the ruling authorities has found a renewed sense of unity.

This was hailed around the world by the Togolese diaspora that is now generously offering support and organizing the lobbying abroad. The country seems to be racing toward a long overdue change and the parties are insisting that the movement will not stop until all conditions are met.

This could be the end of what many call the Togolese exceptionality. Since the 1990s, all countries in West African have seen a transition in government and have put term limits to ensure the peaceful transition of power. With the recent demise of Yahya Jammeh of Gambia, Togo remains an anomaly in this part of Africa where the seeds of democracy are resiliently growing. The people of Togo appear resolute to correct that anomaly and sow freedom after 50 painful years of oppression.

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