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Benin's 2021 presidential election is already decided

After the recent local elections in Benin, a landslide victory for the incumbent Patrice Talon in 2021 seems inevitable

Benin has gone to the polls. Local elections were held across the country on 17 May to elect the 1,815 councillors who will lead the 77 communes for the next five years. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, almost half of registered voters cast ballots, a slightly lower turnout than in the previous elections. Opposition parties having been barred from standing in the 2019 parliamentary elections no longer played a role in this ballot.

The governing parties 'Union Progressiste' (UP) and 'Bloc Républicain' (BR) emerged as the clear winners, securing just under three quarters of votes cast. In third place came 'Forces Cauris pour un Bénin Emergent' (FCBE) on 15 per cent of votes, a party that had practically broken itself apart during party infighting that played out in public in the run up to the election. Its sponsor Boni Yayi, the current President Patrice Talon's predecessor, turned his back on the party a few weeks ago citing 'betrayal'. The modest election result stripped the FCBE of half of its seats. The other two parties that stood in the elections will not send any representatives to the councils as they failed to reach the 10 per cent threshold. This newly introduced threshold makes it impossible for groups concentrated in regional strongholds but that are unpopular nationally to win seats on local councils.

Local election results in a small African country do not usually attract international attention. Nonetheless, a recent amendment to Benin's electoral law has lent a unique significance to this vote for the presidential elections scheduled for April 2021. In future, anyone wishing to run for this office will require at least 16 supporters, known as 'sponsors' – i.e. 10 per cent of all MPs in the National Assembly (83 members) and the mayors (77 incumbents).

Even if the FCBE succeeds in having its candidates elected as mayors in seven municipalities and helps build coalitions in another 17, aspiring

presidential candidates will likely find it difficult to scrape together enough sponsors. The 83 MPs from the UP and BR and the hand-picked candidates for top jobs in regional and local governments stand united behind 'their' president. Support for a rival is unlikely to materialise.

The presidential election 2021

On top of this, the government has on past occasions successfully issued court rulings preventing vocal opponents of the president from running as candidates. It is here worth noting the case of Sebastien Adjavon, an entrepreneur who was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment for alleged cocaine smuggling. The conviction has now been overturned by the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights but has still not been revoked by Benin. Since then, he has been living in France, where he was granted political asylum a year ago.

The former Prime Minister under Boni Yayis, Lionel Zinsou, who four years ago dared to run against Patrice Talon, was sentenced for allegedly overrunning his election campaign budget last August and barred from standing for public office for five years, forcing him to drop out of the next race. Former minister Komi Koutché, who lives in exile in the United States, was sentenced in absentia to 20 years imprisonment, which will surely prevent him from running for office next year. These actions – at least some of which are legally dubious – have eliminated all notable alternatives who could have challenged the president for his job.

Signs thus point to a landslide victory for the incumbent in 2021. This will likely allow Patrice Talon to follow through with his ambitious programme of reform, which has been stymied somewhat by the economic impact of the global Covid-19 pandemic, in his second term until 2026. This also points to persistence – if the government manages to maintain social harmony and build a national consensus, which have been badly shaken recently by increasing pressure on civil liberties.



Hans-Joachim Preuss

Cotonou

Dr Hans-Joachim Preuss, born in 1955, has been representing the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Cotonou, Benin, since 2018. Prior, he worked in Germany and abroad for the GTZ, Welthungerhilfe and the GIZ.