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Suicide of a democracy

Benin has long served as a democratic model for Africa. But its latest elections hint at a creeping decline

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Elections without a real opposition? That's a first in Benin since the end of the dictatorship in 1990 and the subsequent '*renouveau démocratique*'. The country has so far served as a model for many other countries in Africa — despite its minor geopolitical and economic significance. A model for democratic change, regular and orderly elections and peaceful transitions of power. Has it now come to an end?

On 28 April, Benin's five million voters went to the polls. But even before the final count, it was clear that the 83 future representatives of the people will come from only two parties, the '*Bloc Républicain'* and the '*Union Progressiste'*. Both groups are close to current president Patrice Talon and have supported the ruling government since he took office.

Five mostly opposition parties were barred from fielding candidates after the state's electoral authority ruled that they were not suitably qualified to take part. This sparked a fierce public debate in the run-up to the election.

Benin's intellectuals are calling this the country's biggest crisis of democracy since the fall of the self-styled Marxist-Leninist one-party-state 30 years ago and the creation of democratic institutions. They fear that in future, the president, aided by his parliamentary allies, could push through constitutional changes giving him more presidential rights and therefore greater powers to enforce his intended reforms. In the past, the parliamentary opposition and the constitutional court have thwarted these moves amid concerns over an excessive concentration of power. So how has it come to this?

A new electoral code

First of all, there was a change to the charter for political parties, which

the National Assembly passed in July 2018. The reform aimed to make political parties more widely established throughout Benin and thus set a higher threshold for ethnically and/or regionally oriented alliances. In order do achieve this, a requirement for each party was introduced to recruit at least 15 'founding members' in each commune, that is 1,155 '*membres fondateurs*' nationwide.

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Secondly, in September 2018, MPs ratified a new electoral code to end the fragmentation of the party landscape (around 200 parties to date) and encourage the formation of larger political blocs. The most striking of its 397 paragraphs states that each party must achieve at least 10 per cent of the overall vote in order to win seats in the National Assembly. In addition, they must now pay a deposit equivalent to around €380,000 in order to put up candidates.

Last but not least, in February 2019, the national Constitutional Court declared that along with the requisite documentation, the parties must also submit a 'certificate of conformity' to the electoral authority, issued by the Ministry of the Interior.

Only two parties passed the candidature assessment by the electoral authority, their documents supposedly showing only 'minor irregularities'. All other contenders apparently filed documents with unacceptable deficiencies, resulting in their disqualification.

Various attempts to break the deadlock have been made at many levels. Yet neither the president nor the Constitutional Court felt able to intervene in order to make the electoral process more representative. The National Assembly also drew a blank: the opposition and the pro-president '*Bloc Majoritaire*' failed to agree a flexible interpretation of electoral law or a change to existing legislation to bring about an 'inclusive election'. Under the constitution, a consensual approach to the laws and regulations by Parliament would have allowed modifications to the party approval process. Both sides refused to budge; 'playing politics', said one; 'insidious scheming', said the other.

A democracy in decline?

It's too early to make any predictions about the development of Benin's democracy. Even so, current domestic developments do seem to indicate a downturn in democratic progress. The right to strike has been curtailed in Benin for a year now, while restrictions on the dismissal of civil

servants and government employees have been eased. With the ban on the print edition of '*La Nouvelle Tribune*', the country's most widely read critical newspaper, the press has lost a respected voice. Benin is down twelve places in the 2019 annual report of '*Reporters sans Frontières*'.

One Beninese speciality is a targeted reduction in the leeway of political opponents and troublesome elements of society through finely honed bureaucratic regulations that are legitimate but hard to fully comply with, as the Benin authorities have limited capacity, inadequate expertise and insufficient equipment. This straitjacket can be tightened any number of times.

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The opposition issued impassioned pleas to the people of Benin to demonstrate strongly against the marginalisation of their parties. These appeals made little impact. Isolated protests were swiftly dispersed by security forces dispatched to the provinces. All over the country, tanks purchased last year are a visible sign of the state's watchful eye. Prominent opposition figures and journalists were arrested. Despite their subsequent release after a few days, this sent an intimidating message.

Two days before the election, to avert the risk of an electoral boycott by large swathes of the population, the pro-government newspaper '*La Nation*' took the precaution of publishing an article which threatened that those who encouraged others not to vote, possibly using 'false information', would face imprisonment and fines. On election day, Internet access was blocked. No reason was given. Nevertheless, the 'exclusive' election and the disapproving stance of many well-known public figures seems to have deterred many citizens from voting.

Change has to come from within

Benin's people are sceptical of their elected representatives, and levels of trust have fallen still further in recent years: less than half the population believes that the country has a functioning democracy. In fact, in the past few legislative periods, MPs were largely absorbed in power struggles; after being elected to the National Assembly, many of them, untied to a political agenda, were keen to quickly integrate with the majority bloc, which successive presidents have been adept at organising after taking office. Parliament – like previous governments - has achieved hardly any discernible structural transformation in the country.

The population's lack of response to the erosion of democratic structures is understandable, as most people, especially the poor, are yet to see any 'democratic dividend'. Benin remains rooted in the lower reaches of international social and economic indices. Dynamic economic growth in some areas has been partly offset by population growth; the remainder of the surplus is distributed to the members of a growing middle class, chiefly in the urban centres in southern Benin. Inequality of distribution has continued to grow in recent decades.

In other words, these are not ideal conditions for democracy to survive and thrive. On the face of it, there is little reason to expect much support, as developments in Benin will not prompt any discernible response from the international community, apart from a few platitudes about democracy. It's largely up to national stakeholders – politicians, scientists, activists, civil society – to meet the challenge of forming alliances and coalitions to curb the creeping rise in autocracy. Attractive alternatives to the existing system that offer inclusive economic, social and political progress are still in short supply. Social movements and political parties that can enjoy popular support remain a rarity. Perhaps, the current political crisis also has the potential to encourage such initiatives.



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