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Togo's dynasty lives on

The rule of the Gnassingbé family in Togo appears unassailable. But the divided opposition also bears some responsibility

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Africa's longest lasting dynasty lives on. After 53 years of almost total dominance by the Gnassingbé family, there is no sign that a change of government could occur any time soon. The recent elections have confirmed this. In record time (less than 24 hours) the electoral commission announced the results: the current president had been re-elected with 72.4 per cent of the votes.

This means that in a few days' time Faure Gnassingbé, son of the deceased dictator Eyadéma, will commence his fourth term of office. According to a constitutional amendment adopted in May 2019 just two of them would be legal, but the reform left the president a loophole: the mandates prior to the amendment were not counted. In principle, the head of state can now rule until 2030.

Did the 3.6 million voters have any alternative? A total of six opposing candidates lined up against the president. But their election pitch amounted to little more than replacing the current incumbent and listening to the people more in future. Only two of them had any chance at all of coming out on top. One was Jean Pierre Fabre, whom at least no one could accuse of collaborating with the ruling family. He had already stood against Gnassingbé twice, who, according to international observers, had triumphed only by means of electoral fraud.

The other, Agbeyomé Kodjo, parliamentary speaker and prime minister under Eyadéma, owed his position to the recommendation of the former archbishop of Lomé – who also conferred his priestly blessing on his protégé's campaign events – as well as to a number of smaller parties, who felt unable to get behind Fabre as a common candidate.

The election's democratic façade

Togo's stable economic and social situation definitely helped the incumbent. Economic growth rates outstripping population growth come from by the increased turnover of the deepwater port Lomé, an uptick in agricultural exports and infrastructural expansion financed by foreign loans.

Even though income inequality is high even by West African standards and has barely changed over the past two decades, the slowly growing middle class has reaped the fruits of growth. As long as its modest prosperity does not appear to be under threat it is largely loyal to the regime. But while many Togolese believe that the reforms are not yet sufficient to provide them with a higher standard of living, they acknowledge that the president has done a lot more than his father to improve the people's lot.

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Throughout the two-week campaign, the democratic façade was maintained. For example, every candidate had the opportunity to present themselves to the public in a one-hour interview on state television. Otherwise, the incumbent's election advertising far surpassed that of his rivals. He was able to disseminate his message on huge posters and billboards in both urban and rural areas. Many of the billboards that were not reserved by the president or the party backing him had already been rented by state institutions, such as the social security authority. State support for election candidates was only disbursed shortly before the vote – too late to be used for electioneering.

Freedom of association was also curtailed before the elections. For example, demonstrations were permitted only during the day, between 11 and 6 o'clock, only in side streets and no more than once a week. Opposition candidates' election events were banned by prefects and mayors close to the government 'on security grounds'. Supporters of the president blockaded meetings of his political opponents.

The institutions responsible for election preparation and implementation, as well as for establishing the results, were brought into line beforehand. Seventeen of the 19 members of the supposedly independent electoral commission are aligned with the president. Seven of the nine Constitutional Court judges are also adherents of the head of

state, while the other two had not yet been appointed, because the relevant body does not even exist.

Manufactured elections

Civil society organisations called for the voting results to be published by constituency, to enable at least a cursory check. But this was rejected as impracticable by, ironically, the Minister for Human Rights. The specially procured electronic 'system for reliably recording election results' was suspended by the electoral authority only two days before the vote. This made it possible to alter the results after the fact.

Many West African states now make it possible for citizens living abroad to participate in elections. Togo, however, still does not even have reliable statistics. Of the estimated 9,000 Togolese living in France, for example, a mere 28 were able to vote. Indeed, only 348 of the estimated 1.5 million Togolese living abroad could do so, which undoubtedly influenced the election outcome.

On election day itself several observers could not help noticing numerous attempts at manipulation. Voter lists contained false names; citizens found that their names were not registered so they could not vote; ballot boxes were stuffed even before the vote; and virtual polling stations reported fictitious results. Shortly after voting, the house of the most promising opposition candidate, Kodjo, was surrounded by the police and the army. That meant that he could only communicate with his supporters and the press by telephone. At the same time, social media was disabled, in some regions internet access was cut and the websites of critical media were blocked, which meant that local election results could not be disseminated.

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The security forces were very present in the run up to the elections, officially to prevent outbreaks of violence. Road blocks were more heavily manned. Additional checks by a belligerent military, who stopped and searched every car, created an atmosphere of intimidation. In this way the president, who is also head of the armed forces, emphasised in no uncertain terms that the broad-based security apparatus follows his orders. The army remains loyal to its commander, who belongs, like most of its personnel, to the Kabiyé ethnic group.

The opposition needs to unify

The systematic legal violations and restrictions are likely to be difficult to prove or disprove. Shortly before the start of the election campaign the UN and the West African Economic Community CEDEAO called on the Togolese government to enable short- and longer-term election monitoring. But only 280 international observers were accredited to the 9,000 or so polling stations, most notably from CEDEAO, with 79 members, and the African Union, with a delegation of 40.

At national level around 3,000 observers, primarily from civil society organisations, were supposed to be out and about. A substantial number of them were prohibited from taking part at short notice, however, on the grounds it would pose a 'risk of interference in the electoral process'. A proposal of the national bishops' conference to send 9,000 observers to electoral districts at their own expense was rejected by the Ministry of the Interior on the grounds of an alleged lack of neutrality and wasting church funds.

So nothing has changed in Togo. Until the Togolese opposition is able to agree on a common candidate with some prospect of winning, to mobilise their supporters and to come up with a convincing economic and social vision for this desperately poor country it should not be difficult for Gnassingbé and his clan to maintain the facade of a democratically legitimate government and entrench his power. And yet social peace is fragile. It depends on whether the president will be able to stabilise economic growth at a high level and retain the goodwill of international supporters of his development policy.



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