

‘Progress for the Few’ – a Retrospective of Democratisation and Development in Togo

After signs of democratic awakening spreading throughout Africa such as with Gambia’s opposition winning the presidential elections in December 2016, Togo remains the only ECOWAS nation still waiting for substantial democratisation since the 1960s, according to Roland Benedikter and William Mensa Tsedze.

The most recent *Least Developed Countries Report* presented on December 13, 2016 by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) brought once again uncomfortable news: while most developed and emerging countries are growing, the least developed 48 countries on earth are falling further behind and are getting even poorer than they were 25 years ago.

Thirty-four of the least developed countries are located in Africa. Therefore, it is no surprise that the European refugee and migration crisis, viewed as a strong threat to the European unification project and a factor in Brexit and the rise of populist, rightist and nationalist movements across the continent, is partly triggered by economic and poverty migration from Africa.

As a result, the European Union has committed a further 381 million Euros to African nations to tackle irregular migration. The money should benefit the greater Sahel zone. But is this measure enough to reverse the decline of the poorest countries – and migratory flows to Europe? We use Togo as a case study to answer this question.

Togo is one of the smallest countries in West Africa and has attracted very little attention from the international community over the past few decades.

Three years after independence in 1963, the democratically-elected first president and “father of independence” Sylvanus Olympio (1902-1963) was murdered by a group of soldiers, led by Gnassingbé Eyadéma, a member of the Kabye ethnic group and a Roman Catholic allegedly supported by France. Nicolas Grunitsky was installed by the military as the new president following the French example of a presidential republic, but was dismissed by Eyadéma in 1967 through a bloodless coup. Eyadéma himself took power and in 1969 founded the political party *Rally of the Togolese People* (RPT). This was the beginning of de facto one-party rule in the country, with the army mostly composed of members of his ethnic group.





President Faure Gnassingbé has overseen an era of economic development for Togo albeit without sufficient political reform

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After a 38-year mostly repressive reign, Eyadéma passed away in February 2005. The army then installed his son Faure Gnassingbé as the new head of state, contrary to the nation's constitution. However, under pressure by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), elections were hurriedly arranged to take place in April 2005. According to the United Nations, more than 500 people were killed, and tens of thousands fled the country during the ensuing electoral process. Gnassingbé Junior was declared winner of the polls, although there were **allegations of electoral fraud**.

In August 2006, the Togolese political class came to a cross-partisan agreement known as national “universal political agreement” which called for institutional and constitutional reforms, notably limits to the presidential mandate, and two rounds in presidential elections.

In the decade since this agreement was signed, only a few significant constitutional and institutional reforms have been implemented. For example, it has been **now over 30 years since local elections** were held to choose mayors and municipal counsellors, who for decades have been replaced by so-called “special delegations” composed of local and regional members of the RPT or later UNIR (Union for the Republic, a political party created by Faure Gnassingbé and currently the ruling party in Togo that emerged from the former RPT). Decentralisation still barely exists, and the democratic illegitimacy of many local leaders leads to permanent civic disobedience which hinders extra-urban development.

However, national economic progress has been noticeable. Over the past 10 years, the regime of President Gnassingbé has undertaken significant work on transport infrastructure, accomplishing more than his father did in 40 years. Road, airport and maritime development have improved in unprecedented ways. Togo is also one of *African Lion* economies, having experienced economic growth of about 5.5 per cent. An economy based on extractive products such as phosphate and clinker has thrived, while the main port of Lomé plays a key role in serving the exports and imports of the countries of the Sahel zone. The agricultural sector continues to occupy a crucial place in the Togo economy with more than 70 per cent of the national labour force contributing to 39 per cent of GDP. Nevertheless, the sector remains precarious and a characteristic example of the urban-periphery divide, of poor innovation and education, and the majority of young Togolese are reluctant to pursue a career in the sector.

There has been a heavy dependence in the small West African country on national debt relief under the **Heavily Indebted Poor Countries** (HIPC) Initiative of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank which launched in 1996. In 2010, the Togo government proclaimed the

HIPC initiative as *the* magic key to the country’s social and economic development, education and health financing. By that time, the initiative had led to the remission of 82 per cent of Togo’s external debt. But five years later, poverty had reduced by just 3 per cent and external debt had reached new heights of 62 per cent of GDP.

While Togo has made progress in economic development in recent years, but only minimal movement in the political arena and in spreading wealth beyond the traditional elite. This pattern of development without political reforms results in ‘progress for a few’. National economic growth alone is misleading; it is the progress toward broader democratisation, improvement in education and living conditions, the empowerment of a civil society along with stemming the loss of its youth and brightest minds to migration that will make Togo a true success model among smaller African nations. Togo must work on the issue of democratisation both from above and below with more public investment to provide a better future for its citizens.

Read part 2

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