

TOGO: FAMILY MATTERS

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The death of President Gnassingbé Eyadéma on 5 February 2005 after almost 38 years as Togo's head of state has ramifications far beyond the borders of this small, impoverished country. There were, of course, few of his countrymen who could remember a time when he had not dominated the national scene, and his sudden departure suggested to many, friend and foe alike, that the moment constituted either a threat to the established order, or an opportunity to instigate radical change in the domestic balance of power. Yet the principal players in this political drama all faced constraints, not least of which was the ruling edifice constructed by Eyadéma during his long reign, which bound together a number of now vested interests centred upon his own extended family and benefiting others, many of whom hailed from his home region in the north of the country. Not only were all significant organs of the state and formal economy run from the presidency, but the years of Eyadéma's rule had seen the creation of an army more than 10,000 strong, relatively well-trained and equipped by the French, and for the most part comprising members of the president's own ethnic group.

There were other, less tangible, matters, which might be subsumed under the heading of political culture. Roughly put, in many cases the competition between individuals and groups for the political leadership in African states has come to be perceived as so much of a zero-sum contest that compromise, let alone the gracious concession of defeat, is still a rarity. Yet in recent years the continent's leadership, expressing itself through the African Union (AU) and such ideas as those contained in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), had been at pains to demonstrate to the world at large that concerns for "good governance" and "democratic practice" had indeed taken root and were to be encouraged at every turn.

The implicit tension between these two perceptions of the essential nature of African politics was revealed starkly in the days that followed Eyadéma's death.

The late president died en route for emergency treatment overseas. He had been ill for some time, seriously so for the past few months, yet such was the nature of his rule, and the almost supernatural veneration in which his courtiers held him, that anticipating his removal from the scene was almost unthinkable within the presidential palace. He had, over the past few years, introduced his son Faure Gnassingbé to the formal political field, appointing him minister of minerals, transport and communications, and encouraging him to play a prominent role in such negotiations as were necessary with the international donors and with the domestic opposition. Though there was no official acknowledgement of the fact, many observers assumed that of his many sons, the well-educated Faure was being groomed to succeed to the patrimony. A premature formal announcement to this effect could have been counter-productive, antagonising either kinsmen or, more likely, other barons within the ruling RPT (*Rassemblement du peuple togolais*), who might sense their ambitions eclipsed by the formation of a presidential dynasty.

As it stood, the Togolese constitution stipulated that in the event of the president proving mortal, his place as head of state should be assumed by the Speaker of the National Assembly, pending the holding of presidential elections within sixty days.

When it became apparent that Eyadéma's health was failing rapidly, the Speaker, Fambare Ouattara Natchaba, a trusted loyalist, was summoned back from a diplomatic mission to Brussels, where he had been attempting to persuade the European Union of Togo's commitment to democratic principles in the hope of restoring more of the financial assistance withheld since 1993, when Eyadéma had violently aborted Togo's constitutional conference process.

For reasons not fully explained, Natchaba failed to return home in time, and on the death of the president the armed forces effectively took control, closed the Togolese borders and airspace, and declared that in order to avoid a dangerous power vacuum they were installing Faure Gnassingbé in his father's place. Parliament was summoned in emergency session to provide a legal gloss, by dismissing the absent Speaker, now in Cotonou in neighbouring Benin, replacing him in that position with Faure Gnassingbé and changing the constitution to enable the stand-in head of state to complete the unfinished presidential term, which expired only in 2008. That parliament was able to act so unanimously was due largely to the opposition's boycott of the previous parliamentary elections.

Even as they expressed their condolences to the family and countrymen of the departed president, Africa's leaders reacted sharply to this swift elevation of the son by such legally dubious means. The AU and ECOWAS immediately denounced it as nothing less than a military coup. The European Union and the USA followed in slightly more measured tones expressing concern and hope that the Togolese could turn this tragic affair into an opportunity to move towards real democracy. President Chirac, an old ally and friend of Eyadéma expressed his sense of personal loss, but otherwise kept his own counsel, preferring that others should take the lead in what might prove, for France, a delicate matter in a region where there were difficulties enough, especially in Cote d'Ivoire. France, though, as a steadfast supporter, politically and financially, remains a key player, whose protestations of disinterested neutrality in Togo's internal affairs need not be taken at face value.

Having dispensed with the niceties, the AU and ECOWAS showed themselves to be made of sterner stuff than when they had reacted to coups in Guinea-Bissau or the Central African Republic. With President Obasanjo leading the charge they demanded that the constitutional amendments be undone with immediate effect. Diplomatic sanctions were imposed, with worse promised if the Togolese government did not yield. On the streets of Lomé the opposition's supporters gradually worked up their courage, sensibly cautious of the ruthless hand of the security forces.

Concessions were made, piecemeal. Faure Gnassingbé announced that elections would be held very soon, after the controversial code had been debated with his opponents. Then it was made clear that he was talking not merely about legislative, but presidential elections. This having failed to satisfy, parliament was summoned to rescind the constitutional amendments rushed through with such indecent speed. A presidential election would be held within the stipulated sixty days. But parliament refused for the moment to go back on Gnassingbé's appointment as Speaker, leaving him as incumbent and *de facto* presidential contender in the RPT camp.

ECOWAS and the AU made it clear that this was insufficient to ward off isolation, and Faure Gnassingbé decided to yield his position as speaker to the deputy speaker, Abass Bonfoh, who was sworn in as interim head of state on 26 February. ECOWAS and the AU decided that honour was now satisfied, lifted their sanctions and sent a

high profile mission to urge peace and reconciliation among the Togolese. They also decided that the presidential election would be held towards the end of April and, by implication, according to the rules and constitution as modified unilaterally by Eyadéma in recent years.

This was not the outcome that the Togolese opposition had sought, for they had wanted a delay long enough to revisit the reforms envisaged during the government's protracted and unfinished negotiations with the European Union.

Even as he relinquished the interim presidency, Faure Gnassingbé was adopted as the ruling party's electoral candidate.

A number of questions may be raised at this point, for whatever transpires they will be germane.

Did the presidential clique and its armed forces overstep the mark unnecessarily on 5 February by moving so definitely to assure a dynastic succession with such blatant manipulation? If so, of what were they afraid, that elements in the ruling party might try to assert a measure of political independence, or even that the Togolese armed forces might prove less than monolithic? Was Faure Gnassingbé fully in command of his own fate, or was he a reluctant hostage of larger political forces, as some have suggested?

What did the Togolese establishment have to fear from an election to be held at such short notice and on terms so favourable to the presidential party? The electoral code and the management of the polls was still a matter for intense discussion, but as the rules stood there was little chance that a fragmented opposition could overthrow the incumbent administration's candidate in the single round of voting for which provision was made.

Let us take international objections at their face value too, for a moment. What is the desired outcome in all of this? To persuade Africa's remaining despots that they had better mind their manners? To convince the outside world that Africa's political class is mending its ways? Cynically, to distract attention from the opacity of other transitions, including that in Nigeria? Optimistically, to create the sort of political space in Togo that would allow for compromise leading *eventually* to peaceful and consensual regime change? For as things currently stand, even were the opposition to seize the presidency, theirs would be an uncomfortable position, the levers of real control remaining for the present in the hands of their defeated adversaries.

Not least, one has to consider the position of the army. If Togo's opposition should have learned one lesson from the debacle of the constituent assembly in the early 1990s it is that the trappings of power are not proof to the bayonets of a politicised army. In 1991 and 1992 the opposition, egged on by returning exiles, overconfident in the power of the laws they had reformed, and bent on revenge for years of exclusion and oppression overreached themselves with disastrous consequences. Tens of thousands fled the country, others, not so lucky felt the wrath of an army they had publicly despised.

ECOWAS and the AU having declared their satisfaction with developments, the opposition had little alternative but to contest the presidency, and its leaders discussed the necessity of funding a single candidate around whom to rally. Gilchrist Olympio, exiled son of the country's first president, Sylvanus Olympio (who was

murdered in 1963 during Eyadéma's initial eruption onto the political scene), had initially indicated that he would make himself available, but this offer was withdrawn once it became apparent that his absence from Togo during the past twelve months legally barred his candidacy. As a surrogate, the six principal opposition parties nominated Emmanuel Akitani-Bob, Olympio's 74-year old deputy, who had performed a similar role on his behalf in 2003, securing a creditable 34% of the vote.

Though this decision will undoubtedly stand the opposition in good stead, given its historic tendency to coalesce around different personalities rather than principles, it remains to be seen whether it will prove sufficient to overcome the obstacles of contesting an election so firmly under the control of the ruling party. The opposition is aware of the flaws in the process to which it has submitted itself, and continues to argue for a postponement so that the necessary constitutional amendments may be made. The government, having retreated to a position in which it can claim to have defended the current dispensation, is now relieved of the pressure to make any alterations either to the rules or the stipulated time-frame.

All in all, one is tempted to conclude that despite the diplomatic noise, the victory won by ECOWAS and the AU, though welcome, was somewhat hollow, in that it preserved the massive advantages enjoyed by the incumbent party at the polls.

Does Eyadéma's demise signify a change in Togo's political direction? In all probability, much will depend upon what sort of leader Faure Gnassingbé turns out to be.