

Press release from Afrique-Europe-Interact
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31 January 2020: Presidential elections in Togo on 22 February 2020 +++ Afrique-Europe-Interact calls on the public and the German government to critically accompany the entire electoral process in the West African country +++ The human rights situation in Togo remains extremely tense +++ Despite massive protests, President Fauré Gnassingbé has managed to secure a fourth and fifth term in office by amending the constitution +++

As early as 1963 - three years after Togo's independence - the first democratically elected President Sylvanus Olympio was assassinated in a military coup. Since then, the West African country has been in the iron grip of a single family: First, former colonial officer Gnassingbé Eyadéma established an unscrupulous dictatorship - also with the active support of his personal friend Franz-Josef Strauß, the long-time CSU Prime Minister of Bavaria. After Eyadéma's death in 2005, his son Fauré Gnassingbé took over the affairs of state. Only through international pressure he did declare himself willing to hold elections, which, however, were subject to massive fraud. During the subsequent protests, more than 800 people were killed by state security forces. Nonetheless, Fauré Gnassingbé was henceforth regarded as the legitimate President of Togo on the international stage.

Fittingly, Germany resumed state development cooperation with Togo in 2012 after a break of almost 20 years. The reason given was that under Fauré Gnassingbé the country had initiated a "process of democratization, reconciliation and reform". But this assessment is highly questionable. For even if Fauré Gnassingbé governs less brutally than his father, opposition members continue to face severe repression. In their last report on Togo (already published in 2017), Amnesty International writes: "The security forces continued to use excessive violence against demonstrators in 2016. Arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture and other ill-treatment continued, and impunity for human rights violations persisted". Very similar the Togolese League for Human Rights: A report on torture and police violence in Togo published in November 2019 describes severest human rights violations - for example on 21 July 2019 in Lomé in the Hédzranawoé district, when several dozen people were beaten and arrested by security forces with no apparent reason.

Against this background, mass protests have repeatedly occurred between August 2017 and January 2019. People demonstrated not only against the desolate social and economic situation in the country. They also demanded Fauré Gnassingbé's resignation and a return to the 1992 constitution. For this constitution (which had already been repealed in 2002) only provides for two terms of office for presidents, which would have meant that Fauré Gnassingbé would not have been allowed to run in the coming presidential elections. The government reacted to the protests with brutal repression and violence: More than 20 demonstrators were killed, including children and young people. Thousands were injured, hundreds were imprisoned (some to this day). In addition, security forces destroyed private homes and offices of the opposition, and in the meantime many people fled to the neighbouring countries of Benin and Ghana.

Regardless of this, the government and the opposition accepted a mediation initiative by the West African Economic Community ECOWAS at the beginning of 2018. This initiative provided for fundamental changes in the organisation of future elections including the composition of the election commission and of the constitutional court that monitors the elections. However, the Togolese government did not implement these provisions. Moreover, even the law that was supposed to regulate the number of terms of office was softened at a crucial point. In May 2019, the parliament (in which there are just six members of the opposition) decided to limit the number of terms of office to two, but this was done with the addition that Fauré Gnassingbé's previous terms of office are not counted. The Parliament also decided that former presidents should not be charged or convicted for offences committed during their presidency.

That is why it must be all the more worrying that Togolese security forces continue to brutalise the opposition, as three recent examples show:

+++ On 25.08.2019, a regular party meeting of the ANC was dissolved in Lomé for flimsy reasons by security forces. The ANC is the party of Jean-Pierre Fabre, who is considered one of the most promising opposition candidates in the upcoming presidential elections.

+++ On 14.11.2019, the former Archbishop of Lomé, Phillippe Kpodzro, reported that he had received death threats after meeting with the leaders of the opposition alliance "C 14" on 12.11.2019. Similarly, Tikpi Atchadam has to live in neighbouring countries out of fear for his life. He is president of the Parti National Panafricain (PNP), one of the main opposition parties.

+++ On 25.01. and 26.01.2020 two prominent party cadres of the PNP were arrested during night raids without giving any reasons - among others the Secretary General Acoubou A. Moutawakilou.

In view of these and similar incidents, it seems absolutely necessary that the entire election process must be closely monitored by the international public and that any irregularities must be named and, if necessary, sanctioned. The impending irregularities include not only intimidation and discrimination in the run-up to the presidential elections, but also electoral manipulation on the day of the elections itself. This is all the more so because the government refuses to implement self-evident standards in terms of democratic and transparent elections - such as announcing the election results separately according to electoral districts (a measure that makes election manipulation considerably more difficult). According to various surveys, a majority of the population wants Faure Gnassingbé to be voted out of office as president. Among their most important demands are the release of all political prisoners, an end to repression, the prosecution of all those who have committed violence against peaceful demonstrators and a transparent, fair and non-violent organisation of the presidential elections.

Afrique-Europe-Interact supports these demands and asks the (international) public to critically and vigilantly monitor the elections in Togo. This request is addressed particularly to the United Nations, ECOWAS, the African Union and the EU. We would also like to call on the German Federal Government to make a strong plea to the government in Togo for the holding of transparent, fair and non-violent elections. We appeal to the media to examine reports from Togo carefully and critically. The country is not a democracy in the true sense of the word; the current president came to office in 2005 merely through massive use of violence. In this respect, the voices of human rights organisations, independent election observers and representatives of the opposition should be given particular attention - especially after the elections.

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If requested, we also arrange contacts with members of the Togolese diaspora in Germany.

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On the website of Afrique-Europe-Interact, under the heading "Campaigns" in the section "Togo/Solidarity with ATE", there is a variety of background information on the situation in Togo (but only on German).