

TOGO: OR NOT TO GO?

RICHARD CORNWELL

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 that 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 on 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 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 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 to emergency treatment overseas. He had been ill for some time, seriously so for the previous 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 the domestic opposition. Though there was no official acknowledgement, 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 largely because of the opposition's boycott of the previous parliamentary elections.

Even as they expressed their condolences to the family and compatriots of the departed president, Africa's leaders reacted sharply to this swift elevation of the son by such legally dubious means. The AU and the Economic Community of West African States (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 Côte 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.

At the time of writing, then, the succession issue remains unresolved, and diplomacy has not yet exhausted all its resources.

A number of questions may be raised at this point, however, 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 débâcle of the constituent assembly in the early 1990s it is that the trappings of power are not proof against 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 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.

Or is all this merely intellectualising a charade? Is it, after all, 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'?

And even then, where will the next African stage be upon which 'a poor player struts his stuff and frets his hour...'? Benin? Chad? Gabon? Guinea? Congo-Brazzaville? Somebody, somewhere, had better have a script handy.