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Book Part — Accepted Manuscript (Postprint)

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Suggested Citation: Kohnert, Dirk (2009) : Togo: Politics, economy and society in 2008, In: Melber, Henning Mehler, Andreas Walraven, Klaas (Ed.): Africa Yearbook Volume 5: Politics, Economy and Society South of the Sahara in 2008, Brill, Leiden, pp. 177-184

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/301795>

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Togo

Politics, economy and society in 2008

Dirk Kohnert ¹

Abstract: The formal legitimization of democratic transition in Togo in 2008 by free parliamentary elections in October 2007 was honoured by the international donor community. Generous aid and debt relief helped the ailing economy to recover. Domestic politics were already overshadowed by the decisive presidential elections of 2010. Presidential candidates both of the ruling party and the opposition tried their best to create an image of a development-orientated impartial national leader. However, concerning the underlying fabric of informal politics, structured through decades of dictatorship of the Gnassingbé family, little has changed.

Résumé: La légitimation formelle de la transition démocratique au Togo en 2008 par des élections parlementaires libres en octobre 2007 a été honorée par la communauté internationale des donateurs. Une aide généreuse et un allègement de la dette ont aidé l'économie en difficulté à se redresser. La politique intérieure a déjà été éclipsée par les élections présidentielles décisives de 2010. Les candidats à la présidence du parti au pouvoir et de l'opposition ont fait de leur mieux pour créer une image d'un leader national impartial orienté vers le développement. Cependant, concernant le tissu sous-jacent de la politique informelle, structurée par des décennies de dictature de la famille Gnassingbé, peu de choses ont changé.

Keywords: countrywide study, Togo, West Africa, domestic politics, foreign affairs, socio-economic development

JEL-code: A14, F35, N97, O17, O55, Z13

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The formal legitimization of democratic transition by free parliamentary elections in October 2007 was honoured by the international donor community. Generous aid and debt relief helped the ailing economy to recover. Domestic politics were already overshadowed by the decisive presidential elections of 2010. Presidential candidates both of the ruling party and the opposition tried their best to create an image of a development-orientated impartial national leader. However, concerning the underlying fabric of informal politics, structured through decades of dictatorship of the Gnassingbé family, little has changed.

Domestic Politics

The **rivalry inside the ruling class** between the ‘modernisers’ and stubborn traditionalist hardliners, personified by the fraternal strife between the head of state Faure and his junior half-brother and former defence minister Kpatcha Gnassingbé, who had been dismissed from the new cabinet formed in December 2007, continued to hit the headlines. When the president officially commemorated the third anniversary of the death of his father Eyadéma (5.2.) in Kara, the major fief of the clan in Northern Togo, Faure was approached by members of his family and the old ethno-military and political guard for sidelining the vested interests of the power elite. Moreover, Kpatcha, ostensibly absent from the ceremonies, did not renounce from politics. He resumed his seat in parliament for the prefecture of Kozah (14.2.) which he had abandoned last year because of incompatibility with his former office in government. With this step, he did not only assure his parliamentary immunity but also a secure base for the future power play within the ruling party. High ranking international mediators like the presidents of Gabon and Burkina Faso, as well as Libya's head of state Col. Muammar al Gaddafi who visited Kara and Lomé in June (13. to 15.6.), tried to mediate behind the scene in this conflict to little avail, they only achieved a superficial end of hostilities. The president, on the other hand, relied on a tactical low key and appeasement approach, assisted by Pascal Bodjona, minister of state for territorial administration, informally labelled Faure's 'minister for re-election 2010'. In addition, the head of state joined any possible endeavour to become the darling of the donor community, whose backing was considered decisive for the recovery of the economy.

On 15.4. the president started consultations on the creation of a **truth and reconciliation commission** (TRC). This was in line with the comprehensive political agreement between the major political forces (‘Accord Politique Global’, APG) signed on 20 August 2006. The South African TRC, meant to investigate the political violence of the past and to study modalities of appeasement for the victims, has been copied meanwhile by about 40 countries worldwide with varying success. In Togo, it was finally agreed to extend its period of consideration from 1958 up to the bloody political persecutions of 2005, including the politically motivated murder of the first Togolese president Sylvanus Olympio, father of the present opposition leader in 1963. The consultations lasted three months and included alongside political parties a wide range of civil society organizations and even Diaspora communities. The UNHCR, the EU

and the Organisation of French-speaking Countries (OIF) supported the initiative which was welcomed and critically accompanied by amnesty international and the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) in Paris too. Its chairperson, Souhayr Belhassen, who visited Lomé on 25.5. cautioned that the Moroccan TRC model, apparently favoured by Faure Gnassingbé, could leave many Togolese frustrated because it was neither meant to determine guilt nor to put an end to the impunity of the perpetrators of human right violations. The UNHCR, which coordinated the consultations, completed in July a representative UN-funded nationwide opinion survey to which almost 23,000 people of all social strata in the urban centres and in the countryside responded. The results, published on 26.9., underlined the need for a robust mandate of the TRC in view of the biased justice system and prevailing impunity. The final structure and mandate of the commission were still not clear at the end of the year, notably how to approach the role of the army and the security services, responsible for most of the atrocities, was still an unsolved tricky question.

In addition, the **opposition** continued to insist on a revision of the electoral system. Two major controversial issues were the electoral code and the geographical bias in the delimitation of constituency boundaries which were considered a major reason for the defeat of the UFC at the last legislative elections of 2007. The existing delimitation was in favour of the sparsely populated northern strongholds of the ruling party 'Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais' (RPT), but the skewed layout of constituencies would not affect presidential elections where each vote counts equally. However, the major contender of the incumbent president in the 2010 elections, veteran opposition leader Gilchrist Olympio (aged 72) of the 'Union des Forces du Changement' (UFC), living in political exile because of attempts on his life in the 1990s, could still be barred from standing. Unfair rigid residence requirements, inscribed in the constitution in favour of the ruling power in 2002, had prevented his participation already in the 2003 and 2005 presidential polls. Nevertheless, the UFC nominated him unanimously as a candidate for the 2010 elections (19.7.) and demanded a corresponding revision of the partial constitutional amendments and of the electoral code. Yawovi Agboyibo (aged 65), another veteran politician, president of the second largest opposition party 'Comité d'Action pour le Renouveau' (CAR) and previous interim prime minister (up to Dec. 2007), resigned as party leader during a regular party congress on 18.10. He wanted to set an example for the political class of the country and made way for the younger generation. Dodji Apévon (53), also a lawyer and hitherto vice president of his party took his place. However, it was open to question whether Agobyibo would not stand again as a presidential candidate if CAR and UFC would not come to terms.

In December the government submitted a draft bill for the modification of the electoral code unilaterally without prior consultation of the major opposition parties to the parliament. According to its stipulations, the composition of the independent electoral commission ('Commission Électorale Nationale Indépendante', CENI) would be reduced from 19 to 13 members, among them 9 elected by parliament, 2 by civic organisations, and 2 nominated by the government. The UFC and CAR complained that

the due consultation process (Cadre Permanent de Dialogue) agreed upon in the APG was circumvented, furthermore, they rejected the introduction of additional measures of discrimination and exclusion as well as the proposed government interference in the electoral process which could endanger the independence of the CENI. Besides, the government and the EU agreed on a comprehensive population census (16.12.), aimed at establishing a reliable population database for a new delimitation of electoral constituencies, 27 years after the last count which dates back to 1981. It will be financed by the 9th FED and the UN population fund (UNFPA) which is responsible for its execution too.

There were numerous examples of **confidence-building measures** of the government – introduced last but not least to soothe the international donor community on whose good-will national reconstruction to a great deal depended. A new government decree for the regulation of the informal sector (13.2.) aimed at stopping the drain on financial resources and at integrating the activities of informal enterprises into the formal sector. For this purpose a delegation for the organization of the informal sector was created, however, it remained open to question whether this would have any tangible effect on revitalizing of the economy in view of similar efforts in the past which utterly failed all over West Africa. The increase of government regulated **minimum wages** (15.8.) in order to cushion the social and political effects of soaring living cost notably for the lower classes was in the same vein, taking into account that 47 per cent of households live under the poverty line: the guaranteed inter-professional minimum wage doubled from F CFA 13,757 to 20,000 (€ 42), agricultural minimum wages increased as well. The 35,300 public servants received an additional transport allowance of F CFA 5,000 (€ 7.62) in December, in view of the rising fuel prices (increased by up to 18 per cent).

Complying with the UN Millennium Development Goals which demanded a 100 per cent **school enrolment** by 2015, the government abolished primary school fees in October in order to reverse the downward trend in enrolment which had declined from 95 per cent in the early 1990s to 76 per cent in 2006. However, considering that just 61 per cent of school-aged children completed primary school, Togo's pledge to make education universal by 2015 was far-fetched. Certainly, enrolment increased considerably during the year, but school fees had been relatively low anyway (on average US \$ 4 for males, and half of it for females per annum), and the major concern was about the neglected infrastructure. The ministry of education estimated at the end of the year that it needed additional 3,000 teachers, 5,000 new classrooms, some 100,000 school benches and hundreds of thousands of new textbooks, not to speak of the necessary reforms and investment in secondary and tertiary education which would be required to have a sustainable impact on raising skills. Therefore, UNICEF welcomed the initiative but held that it was ill prepared in view of two decades of neglect of the education system in Togo.

Still, other confidence-building measures were the release of 297 prisoners to mark the independence celebrations in April, and a draft bill for the **abolition of the death**

penalty (10.12.), on occasion of the 60. anniversary of the declaration of universal human rights. The UN and human rights organizations welcomed the initiative and urged the government to continue on the way for an impartial justice, against impunity and renouncing all forms of violence, a diplomatic formula to hint at the fact that the bill was rather symbolic. In real practice, legal executions had ceased already 30 years ago. The thorny problem remained that most human right violations in Togo committed or tolerated by the state had been extra-legal killings and political persecution.

The **cabinet reshuffle** of 7.9., notably the appointment of Gilbert Fossoun Hounbo (aged 47) as prime minister, was apparently also meant to please aid donors. A former accountant at Price & Waterhouse and since 2005 director of the UNDP's regional Africa bureau, Hounbo was little known to the population. He was deemed a technocrat, not affiliated with any party, and already the fourth prime minister appointed by Faure Gnassingbé since the latter assumed power in 2005. Hounbo replaced Komlan Mally, a stalwart of the RPT originating from Atakpamé (the president's hometown), who resigned on 5.9. thus remaining hardly one year on his post. He was moved to the health ministry. The new cabinet formed by the prime minister on 15.9. offered little surprise. Most key ministries remained in the same hands of RPT stalwards, the number of portfolios increased from 21 to 27, and the opposition stayed largely absent from the cabinet. One exception being the leader of the 'Convention Démocratique des Peuples Africains' (CDPA), Léopold Messan Gnininvi, hitherto minister of foreign affairs who changed to the ministry of industry.

The **human rights** situation improved further. Within the framework of the cabinet reshuffle, the human rights ministry was awarded to the president of the independent Togolese HR-league, Yakoubou Hamadou. Concerning press freedom Togo improved its rating according to international standards of Reporters sans frontières to the best mark ever (10), thus even surpassing neighbouring Benin (15) or Burkina Faso (13). Togo's status with the much quoted Freedomhouse index improved slightly too, from 'not free' to 'partly free', due to the 2007 legislative elections which were evaluated as 'genuinely free and fair'. However, the index of democracy of the Economist Intelligence Unit, London, introduced the first time in 2006, was probably more realistic because it embodied a wider concept of democracy than mere multi-party rule. It ranked Togo still at the lower end of authoritarian regimes (overall score of 151 worldwide, with North Korea at the bottom with 167, as of September 2008). Almost 7,000 refugees who fled the country in the aftermath of the violent clashes of the 2005 election still did not return home according to the UN refugee offices in Benin and Ghana.

Foreign Affairs

The **EU**, which had **resumed development cooperation** already in November 2007 after a 15 years suspense due to the so-called 'democratic deficit', honoured the

'modernizing' approach of the Lomé government in March (10.3.). On top of 80m € provided already last year, it granted F CFA 80.68bn (123m €) within the framework of the 10th European Development Fund (EDF) for the period 2008 to 2013, the overall aim of which was to improve governance, economic growth and poverty reduction. The good-will measures of the government were well noted by EU Development Commissioner Louis Michel. He went as far as recommending the three years rule of Faure Gnassingbé as 'good example', to be followed by other African countries, when he announced additional EU-budget aid for Togo to the tune of 15m € in a national television speech (4.10.). Apparently, the coup of the incumbent president and the rigged presidential elections of 2005 with its bloody aftermath of political persecution which consolidated the power of the Gnassingbé clan got lost to the EU out of overriding geopolitical reasons. However, within the EU cleavages continued between Paris, pursuing its partisan politics in francophone Africa with its hardly veiled sympathy for the maintenance of the status quo in Togo on the one hand, and Berlin, backed by the British government on the other. The latter two insisted on guarantees for a level playing field for all major political forces.

The **IMF** followed suit in **resuming aid** (21.4.). Fiscal engagements of the government within the framework of the poverty reduction and growth facility (PRGF) programme, accompanied by a credit of US\$ 108.4m for the next three years, were meant to open the way for future public **debt relief** under the heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) and multilateral debt relief (MDRI) initiative to the tune of US\$ 2bn. Togo reached decision point of the HIPC program in November, thus allowing for interim debt relief. 41 per cent of the debt was due to bilateral engagements with members of the Paris Club. The latter approved in June immediate cancellation of US\$ 347m, and additional \$ 393m to be restructured according to Naples terms, i. e. repayment stretched over the next 40 years with a 16 years grace period. This was the more important, as just about 75 per cent total external debt arrear payments of \$ 689m (in 2006, almost 30% of GDP) belonged to members of the Paris Club. The World Bank assisted by granting another \$ 168m, most of it assigned for the repayment of government's arrears to the bank.

Bilateral development cooperation tuned in as well. **France** announced in September the doubling of its budget aid (overall € 5m in 2008) to help the successful transition to democracy and to overcome the external shocks of the global rise in food and oil prices as well as the cost of the heavy flooding in July. The French Secretary of State for Cooperation Alain Joyandet had visited president Gnassingbé already in early September when it became evident that France had a very positive interpretation of the demarche of the Lomé government. France accorded a grant aid of about € 140m for the period 2008 to 2012 (1.9.). Joint military exercises 'Zio 2008' of several thousands of troops of Togo, Benin and France in February underlined these strong links. Therefore, it was a surprise when the president renounced his participation in the 12th Francophone OIF summit in Quebec (17. to 19. 10.) and sent instead his prime minister, Gilbert Houngbo. Probably this was only because Faure Gnassingbé, accompanied by a high ranking ministerial delegation, met the head of state Nicolas Sarkozy at the Elysée and

other members of the French cabinet one month later (20.11.) anyway.

Germany, which had resumed aid already in early December 2007 as well, documented its renewed interest by the visit of the German vice chancellor and foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier in Lomé for discussions with the head of state as well as opposition leaders (11.2.). He was accompanied by a delegation of about 60 German businessmen and journalists and reopened the Goethe Institute, which was burnt down during the 2005 political upheaval, shortly after the German embassy had granted asylum to the then interior minister François Boko, who had in vain cautioned against large-scale election rigging and the ensuing bloody confrontations. This was the first high ranking German visit since 1993. A delegation of German parliamentarians followed suit in mid-November for the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the work of the German Development Service (DED) in Togo.

On occasion of an official visit by a delegation of the Chinese Communist Party in Lomé (16. to 18.2.) president Gnassingbé lauded the long-standing ties with **China**. China and Togo signed two economic and aid agreement in Lomé (28.11.) on about US\$ 6m. A first meeting of the China-Togo Mixed Commission on Economy and Trade was held in Lomé on 24.2. China became Togo's first trading partner (31 per cent of Togo's imports in 2006). The volume of external trade between both countries reached \$ 570m already in 2005 with an upward trend. About 70 small and medium-sized Chinese enterprises (textiles, shoes, kitchenware, mechanic and electric consumer goods, bikes etc.) with an estimated turnover of US\$ 40m invested already some \$ 20m in their establishments in Togo.

At the African Union Summit in Egypt (1.7.), Togo joined the **African Peer Review Mechanism** (APRM) of the NEPAD as 29th member. The newly established APRM centre of excellence in neighbouring Ghana, assisted by the World Bank, Canada and Germany to enhance good governance in the sub-region, agreed to share its experience with its peer review exercise. Ghana was the first country to reach this final stage of the APRM process.

Socioeconomic Developments

The **weak performance of Togo's economy** in the past (GDP growth per head was negative in three out of four past years) continued. Not only as a repercussion of the enduring political crisis and suspended aid (up to 2007) but also due to more recent external shocks. Bad weather and the flood which hit at the end of July, destroyed vital roads and bridges to the North as well as crops; the soaring global fuel and food prices detracted growth as well. Real GDP grew by mere 0.8 per cent during the year, inflation was estimated at about 8 per cent. The production of cotton, the major export crop, declined even by 27 per cent to 40,000 t due to bad weather and rising fertilizer prices.

The **2009 budget** adopted on 19.12. in parliament by the absolute majority of the ruling party foresaw a rise of expenditures (mostly on infrastructure, social services and domestic debt arrears) by 13,8 per cent, based on an estimated increase of revenue by 16,4 per cent. The opposition castigated the unrealistic provisions that would probably increase the budget deficit of estimated 2.9 per cent of GDP (in 2008) even further. Negotiations on Economic Partnership Agreements (**EPAs**) with the EU stagnated. Togo was deemed to be among those countries which would be hardest hit by the loss of revenues due to trade liberalization demanded by the EU. Therefore, the government had a close look at the preparation of an African EPA template to be elaborated as a common AU negotiating platform by the end of January 2009.

In recent years Togo apparently became - beside Guinea-Bissau, Cap Verde and Senegal - another **entry point of drogues**, notably of cocaine from Latin America. In November the Togolese police dismantled a Columbian trafficking network which used Lomé and the tiny airport of Niamtougou (450 km to the North of the capital) as a transit hub to the European markets. The police seized more than 1.2t of cocaine, but the authorities suspect high ranking police officers to be in the deal.

After three years of advocacy work, human rights organizations succeeded in convincing the **vodun** priests of Togo to denounce officially their customary practices violating the human rights of minors, i. e. of young girls, baptized as adepts of vodun (*vaudoussi*) and restrained to the services of the convents or urged into forced marriages. The decision was communicated by the head of the vodun priest, Maman Kponou of Togoville, end of May. In December the supreme chief of the **Ogboni** fraternity of Benin installed an official branch of the fraternity in Togo by enthroning a national Ogboni chief, Olori-Olouwo, in Lomé. The reformed Ogboni society is a powerful informal religious-political network originating from Yorubaland (Nigeria) and present all over Western Africa, meant among other to combat witchcraft. Already in March, the **Togolese freemasons** had installed their new leader of the Togolese Grand Loge at its temple of Djidjolé at the Western outskirts of Lomé (8.3.). The lodge is affiliated with the French Loge (Grand Orient de France, GLNF, the centre of the influential Franco-African freemason networks) and is considered a notorious supporter of the Eyadéma clan. Its new head, the lawyer and ex-army officer Mbenewar Bataka, was a Kabyé as well and at friends with the former defence minister Kpatcha Gnassingbé; his half-brother, the head of state was said to await initiation by the Gabonese president Omar Bongo, an important freemason dignitary, as well.

Zusammenfassung: Die formale Legitimation des demokratischen Übergangs in Togo im Jahr 2008 durch freie Parlamentswahlen im Oktober 2007 wurde von der internationalen Gebergemeinschaft honoriert. Großzügige Hilfe und Schuldenerleichterung halfen der maroden Togoischen Wirtschaft, sich zu erholen. Die Innenpolitik wurde bereits von den kommenden entscheidenden Präsidentschaftswahlen 2010 überschattet. Präsidentschaftskandidaten sowohl der Regierungspartei als auch der Opposition versuchten ihr Bestes, ein Image des entwicklungsorientierten unparteiischen nationalen Führers zu schaffen. Was jedoch die grundlegende Struktur der informellen Politik betrifft, die durch die jahrzehntelange Diktatur der Familie Gnassingbé strukturiert wurde, hat sich wenig verändert.