

15 Pan African National Party Leaders Sentenced to Prison in Togo

Opposition forces face further repression as the Gnassingbe administration mobilizes its supporters

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Featured image: *Faure Gnassingbé* (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

*Unrest swept the West African state of Togo beginning on August 19-20 when an opposition coalition CAP 2015 and the Pan African National Party (PNP) demanded the resignation of the current government of **Faure Gnassingbe**.*

The Gnassingbe family has dominated Togolese politics since 1967 when Faure's father, **Etienne Gnassingbe Eyadema**, staged a military coup which overthrew **President Nicolas Gunitzky**. Four year prior to this putsch on January 13, 1963, Sgt. Etienne Eyadema, had removed and assassinated **President Sylvanus Olympio**. After the 1967 coup against Gunitzky, Eyadema became president of the country.

On August 30, fifteen members of the PNP were sentenced to terms of detention. The defendants were accused of damaging public property. Twelve other leaders were acquitted due to lack of evidence.

Nonetheless, no witnesses were called to testify during the trial which was held less than two weeks after the arrests occurred. Advocates for the PNP have denounced the legal proceedings as illegitimate.

One of the fifteen leaders sentenced was PNP Secretary General, **Dr. Kossi Sama**. The opposition figures received prison terms of five to nine months.

A lawyer for the defendants said the trial was politically motivated. The lack of evidence presented and the circumstances surrounding the opposition leaders' arrests revealed the lack of objectivity by the court.

Paul Dodi Apevon, a lawyer for the defendants, said of the hearings:

"All they've said today is that people damaged public property, but no-one has testified to this. There is nothing in the prosecution case that names a witness who could prove that they were seen somewhere doing a specific crime."

Togo Rebellion Gains Support in Diaspora

Thousands of people went out into the streets on August 19-20 in at least two cities inside

Togo, the capital of Lome and the northern city of Sokode, where seven people were reportedly killed. Solidarity protests also occurred in Ghana, Gabon and New York City.

During the course of the unrest, seven soldiers were taken into custody by the opposition forces in response to the deaths of protesters. All seven of the troops were eventually released by the demonstrators.



Togo opposition on the march for removal of neo-colonial regime in Lome (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

Protests against the continuing rule of the Rally for the Togolese People (RPT) headed by Faure Gnassingbe were perhaps the most significant in Ghana, where the Ewe nationality is separated between the two neighboring states in the east of the country. Large rallies in Ghana by Togolese nationals prompted requests from various political quarters for mediation by the newly-elected government in Accra headed by New Patriotic Party (NPP) **President Nana Dankwa Akufu-Addo**.

The August 19-20 demonstrations have demanded the reinstallation of the previous 1992 constitution which mandated a multi-party political system where presidents can only serve two terms in office. Nonetheless, ten years later the constitution was amended to allow Eyadema Gnassingbe to run for a third time. He died in office in 2005.

In contravention to the constitution after Eyadema's death, Faure was sworn in as president prompting widespread criticism. However, in an election later that year, Faure Gnassingbe won the elections continuing the political rule of the family.

The RPT government has responded with repression by the security forces and the sentencing of key political leaders in the PNP. Police and soldiers utilized teargas and other crowd control methods to clear the streets of opposition protesters.

Gnassingbe is attempting to discredit the PNP and other opposition parties by staging demonstrations in support of the government in Lome. **Prime Minister Selorm Klassou** led marches of RPT supporters where participants wore t-shirts with the image of Gnassingbe and chanted slogans praising his rule as president.

As a result of the repressive conditions prevailing inside the country, opposition parties cancelled planned demonstration for August 30-31. Protest actions are now scheduled for

September 6-7.

They are demanding that all political prisoners be released immediately and a speedy departure of the RPT administration. The opposition coalitions appealed to the population to attend the hearings where political prisoners were sentenced.

In a joint statement released by CAP 2015, the Group of Six and the PNP, they emphasize:

“In response to the expectations of the Togolese people, Cap 2015, the Groupe des 6 and the PNP agreed on Wednesday (Aug. 23) to join forces to bring about the liberation struggle of Togo. Already, Cap 2015, the Group of 6 and the PNP have made arrangements to contact other opposition political parties, civil society organizations, the Diaspora and all patriots, so that they can reinforce this great movement of national liberation.”

International Implications of the Togolese Unrest

At present President Gnassingbe is the Chair of the regional Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Consequently, pressure is being placed on both ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) to address the present political crisis in Togo.

A civil society organization known as the Foundation for Security and Development (FOSAD) issued a statement on August 25 calling for ECOWAS to acknowledge the demands of Togo’s opposition parties.

The Executive Director of FOSAD, **Ms. Afi Yakubu**, said in the declaration that:

“The loss of two lives on 19th August is enough for the regional bodies to move in and initiate a dialogue between the Government of Togo and the opposition. It has become obvious that the periodic demonstrations and agitation of the opposition is growing and gaining grounds. It will be unfair and unfortunate to lose another life on this same ground when the indicators are glaring.” (Ghana News Agency)

Another organization in Ghana, the ECOWAS Community Development Media Network (ECOWAS CDP), condemned the violence in Togo as well. The CDP decried the role of the Togolese security forces in their attempts to suppress freedom of speech and association.

The CDP statement related to the role of the security forces emphasizes:

“The counter attacks by government defeats the purpose of a growing democracy and rather portrays Africa as a continent where democracy and rule of law exist only on paper and not in reality. Civil unrests create social and economic inequalities, widens poverty gap and leaves women, children and the physically challenged in extremely vulnerable positions. Women and children are likely to be displaced and subsequently forced to take refuge in neighboring countries if the peace is not restored.”

This same memorandum from the CDP continues noting:

“Infrastructure and systems built over the years could also be destroyed if

immediate steps are not taken to arrest the conflict in time. Similarly, intra-regional trade between Togo and other countries within the ECOWAS sub-region could suffer severely in a situation that could lead to the loss of livelihoods of the majority of citizens who could be trading on the commodity markets or engage in transit trade. The CDP Network believes that while the protests are within the rights of the people, the President of Togo and his political allies are expected to protect the very people they seek to govern, and since he cannot govern an empty country without its people, immediate steps should be taken to safeguard the peace of that country.”

Ghana and Togo have a shared history from the early days of independence in the 1950s and 1960s. Ghana’s first Leader of Government Business, Prime Minister and President **Dr. Kwame Nkrumah** (1951-1966) campaigned for the merger of the two states which were divided by the advent of German, French and British imperialism in West Africa.

Nevertheless, Olympio wanted the succession of the eastern region inhabited by the Ewe population in order for it to join Togo. Despite efforts by Olympio to initially distance the early Togolese government from Paris, eventually France gained greater influence after independence.

Gnassingbe Eyadema, who served for years in the French military fighting on the side of imperialism in both Vietnam in the early 1950s and Algeria in the subsequent years of the struggle by the National Liberation Front (FLN) between 1954-1961), oversaw the expansion of the security forces after 1963. The recent unrest in Togo has resulted in Ghana heightening its security on the border with its neighbor.

A high-level Ghana governmental delegation led by the Ministry for National Security visited Togo on August 25 on a mission to mediate a settlement between the Gnassingbe administration and the opposition led by the PNP. Whether these efforts are successful largely depends upon the decisions of the ruling PKT in Lome related to whether the national bourgeoisie will loosen its control over the Togolese state.

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