



Political Reforms and Persistent Democratic Issues in Togo: What Implications for the Commonwealth?

Réformes politiques et problèmes démocratiques persistants au Togo : quelles implications pour le Commonwealth ?

Mahamadi OUEDRAOGO

Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Burkina Faso

Email : mahamadi_ouedraogo@ujkz.bf

Orcid id : <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7498-0766>

Lalbila Aristide YODA

Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Burkina Faso

Email: arisyoda@yahoo.com

Abstract: Since its independence from France in 1960, Togo has experienced several political crises, beginning with a military coup d'état in 1963, followed by another in 1967, which kept power within the Gnassingbé family. Since then, this family has ruled the country through constitutional amendments and strict control over electoral processes. The adoption of the Constitution of the Fifth Republic in 2024 transformed Togo's political system from a presidential to a parliamentary system, effectively removing presidential term limits. This reform followed Togo's accession to the Commonwealth in 2022. This study uses a qualitative documentary analysis of constitutional texts, scholarly literature, reports from international organisations, and media sources, framed through the lens of Authoritarian Resilience Theory, to examine political dynamics in Togo. The results indicate that, while authorities present these political shifts as measures to strengthen democracy and promote good governance, critics argue that they instead contribute to perpetuating dynastic rule. The analysis indicates that dynastic rule persists in Togo despite recent political reforms and its membership in the Commonwealth.

Keywords: Constitution, Parliamentary system, The Commonwealth, Togo.

Résumé : Depuis son indépendance de la France en 1960, le Togo a connu plusieurs crises politiques, à commencer par un coup d'État militaire en 1963, suivi d'un autre en 1967, qui a permis à la famille Gnassingbé de consolider son pouvoir. Par le biais de révisions constitutionnelles et d'un contrôle étroit des processus électoraux, cette famille a maintenu son emprise sur le pouvoir depuis lors. En 2024, l'adoption de la Constitution de la cinquième République a transformé le système politique togolais d'un régime présidentiel en un régime parlementaire, supprimant de facto la limitation des mandats présidentiels. Cette réforme est intervenue peu après l'adhésion du Togo au Commonwealth en 2022. Cette étude s'appuie sur une analyse documentaire qualitative de textes constitutionnels, de la littérature académique, de rapports d'organisations internationales et de sources médiatiques, ainsi que sur le cadre théorique de la résilience autoritaire pour analyser la dynamique politique au Togo. Les résultats indiquent que, bien que les autorités présentent ces réformes politiques comme des mesures visant à renforcer la démocratie et à promouvoir la bonne gouvernance, les critiques estiment qu'elles contribuent plutôt à perpétuer un pouvoir dynastique. L'analyse montre que le pouvoir dynastique persiste au Togo malgré les réformes politiques récentes et l'adhésion du pays au Commonwealth.

Mots-clé : Constitution, Régime parlementaire, Le Commonwealth, Togo.

1. Introduction

This research examines the relationship between political reforms and the persistence of longstanding governance issues in Togo. More specifically, it aims to analyse whether the country's institutional reforms and its membership in the Commonwealth have effectively appeased the political arena. Following its independence from France in 1960, Togo has experienced persistent political instability and the consolidation of authoritarian rule. The overt

crises began with the 1963 coup d'état that killed the first president, Sylvanus Olympio. Following that event, Nicolas Grunitzky, who had become president, was overthrown in the 1967 coup d'état that brought Gnassingbé Eyadéma to power (Heise, 2024, p. 365), marking a 38-year reign. Following his death in 2005, his son, Faure Gnassingbé, who succeeded him, remains in power. Therefore, the Gnassingbé family has ruled Togo for 59 years, reflecting dynastic rule. In 2024, as the 1992 Constitution prescribes a two-term limit of five years each, the Togolese authorities decided to adopt a new Constitution, bringing the country to its Fifth Republic. This move marks a significant shift from a presidential system to a parliamentary one, with no term limits. Theoretically meant to foster a more balanced distribution of power, this constitutional reform, according to Togolese opposition parties, is just a strategy to remove presidential term limits and extend President Faure Gnassingbé's executive dominance.

Indeed, the political landscape has not yet undergone significant changes, and the country's governance challenges persist. Although Togo has held multiparty elections since 1992, elections have consistently been undermined by irregularities (Tété, 2018, p. 172). Moreover, even though "opposition parties are allowed to form and operate", they are prevented from competing fairly and effectively campaigning; "their protests are met with violence and arrests, and their leaders are criminalised" (CIVICUS, 2024). As a result, some of them fled into exile, and many opposition parties do not even have seats in Parliament. This testifies to the persistence of the old political realities in the new political system.

Before the establishment of the parliamentary system, Togo joined the Commonwealth in June 2022, alongside Gabon, thereby increasing Africa's share of the Commonwealth to over a third of its members (Schofield, 2022, p. 525). Commenting on Togo's Commonwealth membership, Yates (2022) notes that the decision was driven by a desire to expand its trade opportunities (p. 634). However, beyond its economic benefits, the Commonwealth is founded on shared values. Therefore, membership could be seen as a stepping stone toward a system that strengthens democracy, good governance, the rule of law, freedom of speech and assembly, etc.

However, to date, limited scholarly attention has been paid to the interconnection between Togo's 2022 Commonwealth membership and its 2024 constitutional transformation. This leads us to ask the following questions: firstly, how has political authority been maintained in Togo since independence? Then, what are the implications of the 2022 Commonwealth membership and 2024 constitutional reform? Have these shifts ended the country's political problems? Finally, how can democracy and good governance be improved in Togo? To answer these questions, the research is organised into three main sections: first, the Methodology section details the use of qualitative documentary analysis and Authoritarian Resilience Theory to justify our approach; second, the Results section presents the key findings regarding the historical persistence of dynastic rule and the specific mechanics of the recent constitutional shifts; and finally, the Discussion section interprets these findings to assess whether the reforms represent true democratic progress or a strategic recalibration of control, while offering practical recommendations for Togo's political stability.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the relationship between political reforms and the persistence of longstanding governance issues in Togo. A qualitative design is particularly appropriate in this context, as it enables the exploration of complex political and institutional dynamics that quantitative indicators cannot readily capture. By focusing on Togo, the study seeks to provide an in-depth analysis of how successive reforms interact with deeply rooted political practices and institutional structures. The analysis relies primarily on documentary sources, including constitutional texts (the 1992 Constitution

of the Fourth Republic, its 2002 and 2019 amendments, and the 2024 Constitution of the Fifth Republic), publications from the Commonwealth Secretariat, reports produced by international organisations, as well as secondary academic literature dealing with political developments in Togo. These materials have provided insights into both the formulation and implementation of political reforms and their implementation over time. The study employs qualitative content analysis to identify recurring patterns in the outcomes of reform initiatives. To this end, particular attention has been paid to the extent to which these reforms fail to address the persistence of political tensions and governance challenges in the country.

From a theoretical perspective, the study is grounded in the Authoritarian Resilience Theory developed by Nathan (2003). Applying this framework helps explain how autocratic regimes withstand challenges by adapting their institutions and strategies to preserve power. Such systems often legitimise their authority through constitutional revisions, controlled pluralism, and international engagement, even as they suppress political freedoms in practice.

3. Results

3.1. Historical Context of Dynastic Rule in Togo

Togo has been ruled by the same family for 59 years already, from father to son. Indeed, the hope raised by the independence of most African countries in the 1960s was short-lived in many of these countries, including Togo. Describing this disenchantment, Heise (2024) states that 1960 was the “Year of Africa”, when many states, “including French Togoland, gained their independence” (p. 38). However, the promising post-colonial future quickly turned to disillusionment “in the face of the continuity of global inequality, insecure statehood, economic dependency, and especially the increasing number of autocracies, including in Togo, where after an initial coup d’état in 1963, Gnassingbé Eyadéma finally seized absolute power in 1967” (Heise, 2024, p. 38).

Having established military rule in Togo, President Gnassingbé Eyadéma maintained a one-party government until the early 1990s, when he organised multi-party elections (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024; Kohnert, 2021, p. 3). However, that opening to multipartyism did not undermine his *Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais* (RPT, Rally of the Togolese People) party’s chances of winning successive elections with overwhelming majorities. The *Union pour la République* (UNIR, Union for the Republic) party, led by Faure Gnassingbé, which succeeded the RPT, followed in its footsteps, “maintaining a majority of seats in today’s legislature” (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024). It is a widely acknowledged reality that in many African countries, incumbent presidents rarely lose elections. This means that alternation in power has little chance to occur without a constitution that prescribes term limits. In fact, in Togo, presidential terms were unlimited until 1992, when the Constitution introduced a term limit. In that Constitution, it is clearly stated that the President of the Republic is elected for a five-year term, renewable once (*Constitution de la IV^e République*, 1992, art. 59). However, in 2002, President Gnassingbé Eyadéma removed the term limit through a constitutional amendment to allow himself to be elected for unlimited 5-year terms (*Loi N°2002-029 portant modification de la constitution du 14 octobre 1992*, 2002, art. 59). When he died in February 2005, he left an unprepared political class.

The military then proclaimed his son Faure Gnassingbé as the new president (Kohnert, 2021, p. 3; Tété, 2018, p. 40) to perpetuate the family’s reign. This form of succession caused national and international outrage, obliging the newly selected president to call a presidential election in April of the same year (2005). As anticipated by observers, that election was marred by irregularities and caused political violence that were condemned by the international community (Tété, 2018, p. 166). Nevertheless, this did not prevent Faure Gnassingbé from being sworn in as President on 4 May 2005 (Kohnert, 2021, p. 3), confirming an authoritarian consolidation of power. Yet, authoritarian rule often faces domestic

contestation, which can undermine the regime's legitimacy and stability. This is confirmed by Nathan (2003), who argues that "authoritarian systems are inherently fragile because of weak legitimacy, overreliance on coercion, overcentralization of decision making, and the predominance of personal power over institutional norms" (p. 6). In light of this, it becomes obvious that Togo's political system is run by a one-family rule, thus constituting a dynasty.

In 2019, President Faure Gnassingbé had the 1992 Constitution amended to reintroduce term limits. Thus, once again, the President of the Republic should be elected for a maximum of two five-year terms (*Loi N° 2019-003 du 15 mai 2019 portant modification de la constitution du 14 octobre 1992*, art. 59). As the law does not apply retroactively, the clock was reset to allow President Faure Gnassingbé to run for two new 5-year terms from 2020. That is, he was allowed to run for office in 2020 and 2025 and remain in power (legally) until 2030. In 2024, he called for a change in the country's political system from a presidential system to a parliamentary system; hence the adoption of the Constitution of the Fifth Republic.

In this Constitution, the country has two heads: the President of the Republic, who is a symbolic figure, and the President of the Council, who retains the real executive power. The President of the Republic is henceforth elected by the Parliament in Congress (*Constitution de la République Togolaise*, art. 35) for a 4-year term, renewable once (art. 37). In this regard, on 3 May 2025, the Parliament elected Jean-Lucien Savi de Tové, who was sworn in as the first President of the Republic of the Fifth Republic.

When it comes to the President of the Council, he or she is the leader of the majority party in Parliament (art. 47). As Faure Gnassingbé is the leader of the UNIR party, which won a landslide victory in the 2024 legislative election, he was therefore appointed President of the Council, not elected by universal suffrage. Then, he was sworn in on 3 May 2025, as Togo's first President of the Council. After taking the oath, he took the lead of the government and became the supreme commander of the armed forces. He is the one who exercises authority over the administration, oversees foreign policy, represents the country abroad, ensures the execution of laws, and exercises regulatory power (art. 50). In fact, this is a continuation of his role in the former political system. Then, though the system has changed on paper, it has not changed in practice.

From then on, the President of the Council is allowed to stand for unlimited six-year terms, so long as he remains the leader of his party and the party continues to hold a parliamentary majority that continues to have confidence in his leadership. Therefore, constitutionally, the term limit should no longer raise issues, because in a parliamentary system, it is the leader of the majority party who forms a government and leads the country in accordance with his party's programme. This situation demonstrates the persistence of dynastic rule in Togo. In fact, without the political shift and its subsequent Constitution of the Fifth Republic, political alternation could occur in 2030, marking the end of President Faure Gnassingbé's two new five-year terms, as permitted by the 2019 amendment to the 1992 Constitution. A change of leaders could have opened the way for new leadership and policies capable of addressing the country's economic challenges, as it remains a low-income country. This indicates that the country's authorities have not been able to implement good governance practices for significant economic development. Indeed, as some scholars argue, sustainable democratic consolidation is often associated with broader socio-economic development.

Faseke (2021) confirms the interplay between democracy and economic development when he asserts that democracy is a hollow concept if it does not rest on a solid foundation of economic development (p. 27). This is particularly relevant to many African countries where leaders often prioritise the rhetoric of democracy over the practical pursuit of economic transformation. Instead of using principles of good governance to address persistent economic stagnation, such leaders prefer pursuing a democracy that neither fosters genuine participation nor promotes accountability. In this context, democracy becomes procedural rather than

meaningful and impactful. Therefore, the real challenge in Togo today lies less in constitutional reform itself than in the consistent implementation of constitutional principles in ways that can effectively halt the persistence of longstanding political problems.

3.2. Persistence of Old Political Problems

In all likelihood, Faure Gnassingbé is following in his father's footsteps, probably to be replaced by a family member or a relative. That is why alternation in power in the country remains a distant reality, despite the opposition parties' efforts through protests and denunciation meetings, which are often repressed or simply banned. Kohnert (2021) states that in 2005, when a significant number of the Togolese population organised a protest against the outcome of the elections, the authorities sent the military to crush them, killing many and causing many to emigrate to neighbouring countries (p. 3). Similarly, the protestors against the controversial 2019 constitutional amendment were severely repressed. In 2024, the opposition parties' attempts to meet to denounce the new Constitution were banned. More recently, from June to September 2025, opposition parties, artists, influencers, and civil society organisations, especially the *Front Citoyen Togo Debout* (FCTD), called for protests to which the national security forces responded with violence, defeating the demonstrators, some of whom were reported dead. Thus, Togo still has to uphold democracy, which also means acknowledging and accepting dissenting voices. Otherwise, the parliamentary system, meant to strengthen democratic governance, would end up reinforcing the dynastic rule.

Normally, a new political system is meant to bring political progress for the benefit of all. But according to many observers and analysts, Togo's new system appears largely symbolic in practice. It lacks a favourable field of implementation because, while the system has changed, the actors and their interests and ambitions have not changed. That is, Faure Gnassingbé and his ruling party maintain the same capacity to win large majorities in both legislative and senatorial elections. On top of this, the ruling party's continued exercise of power should no longer be disturbed by the troubling issue of term limits. Therefore, Togo must rise to the challenge of achieving political stability by clarifying its political game and enforcing human rights and the rule of law. This is possible because, if the parliamentary system is well-intentioned, it can dedramatise the country's political life by replacing high-stakes presidential elections with a more collaborative governance model, likely to reduce election costs, prevent social unrest, and enhance government accountability to the National Assembly.

According to the country's authorities, the new political system aims to ease the political scene and improve governance. Normally, since term limits should no longer constitute a controversial issue, there should be no protest against the mandate of the President of the Council, which should just depend on the performance of his party in elections. Then, there should be no repression, no arrests, no violence, and their related consequences. However, this remains challenging because the idea of the new Constitution did not emerge from national will but was rather unilaterally imposed by the ruling party, without extensive consultation or a referendum.

That is why opposition parties, civil society organisations, and critics remain categorical in their rejection of this Constitution and its institutions. This means that protest meetings may continue to be organised, with all the associated risks. Against this backdrop, Eric Dupuy, an opposition party leader, in a news conference, called on the population to reject this Constitution and to oppose it massively. He argues: "We know that the struggle will be long and hard, but together with the Togolese people, we will do everything we can to prevent this constitutional coup d'état" (Africanews, 2024). As expected, the news conference was broken up by the police. As the ruling party would not authorise such gatherings, there is a risk

of violence escalating. Yet, Togo is now a member of the Commonwealth, an organisation committed to democracy, human rights, the rule of law and other shared values.

3.3. Togo's New Constitution and Commonwealth Membership Challenge

In March 2024, following President Faure Gnassingbé's call for a new republic, Togolese legislators drafted and approved a new constitution, which Parliament enacted in April 2024, providing for the transition from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary system. That is, Togo adopted the Constitution of its Fifth Republic, as President Gnassingbé promulgated it on 6 May 2024. This Constitution, apart from shifting the political regime, establishes a bicameral Parliament comprising the National Assembly (first chamber) and the Senate (second chamber). However, the Togolese political landscape remains dominated by the ruling party (UNIR), with 108 of the 113 seats in the National Assembly as of the 29 April 2024 legislative elections following the constitutional amendment. Following that overwhelming parliamentary majority, in application of the new Constitution, Togo held its first-ever senatorial election on 15 February 2025, from which the ruling party won 34 of the 41 seats available. To these 41 elected senators, the Senate is completed by 20 senators appointed by the President of the Council, Faure Gnassingbé, as provided by the new Constitution. This indicates that the new Constitution has further strengthened the ruling party's executive power.

In light of this, as reported by Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024), Togo's Constitution of the Fifth Republic "establishes a new powerful executive position of President of the Council" (p. 1) who acts as a powerful prime minister for a 6-year term, renewable indefinitely. While the ruling party views this as a democratic shift that would foster institutional stability and bring a solution to the country's old socio-political crises, the opposition parties denounce what they describe as a strategic monopolisation of power. They oppose eliminating universal suffrage for the presidency and ending term limits. They maintain that the Togolese people must have the opportunity to elect their leader directly. They reject the new system, describing it as a constitutional coup perpetrated by President Gnassingbé to circumvent presidential term limits in order to extend his power indefinitely (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024, p. 1).

Buttressing the opposition parties' view, CIVICUS (2024) notes that "if democracy is a system in which governments can lose elections, Togo doesn't come anywhere close" because the UNIR party "is firmly in control", using the national security forces "to intimidate the opposition and silence dissent, and relies on patronage to buy loyalty and gather votes". The opposition is therefore left with less room to manoeuvre. This shows that the new Constitution and its innovations are still far from solving the country's political crisis. That is why, from June to September 2025, the country was once again rocked by various protests, which were violently dispersed by security forces. In addition to the repression, arrests were also made, and access to social networks was restricted. In this context where no national consensus was sought before the constitutional amendment and where opposition parties and critics are denied the opportunity to express dissenting views on the political system, Togo's new political system has yet to promote genuine democracy.

This clearly demonstrates that, although Togo has shifted from a presidential to a parliamentary system, there has been no corresponding shift in political culture. In other words, the political actors responsible for implementing the new constitutional provisions continue to operate according to the same practices and attitudes that characterised the previous system. Consequently, this inconsistency between institutional reform and political behaviour has contributed to the persistence of protests and outbreaks of violence in the country.

However, before this constitutional reform, Togo had already joined the Commonwealth, an organisation of British origin that champions democratic governance, the rule of law, human rights and other values that member countries should embrace. Beyond the adherence to the organisation's principles, many of its member countries have adopted forms of parliamentary systems of governance, modelled after the British system. So, Togo's shift to a parliamentary system could be seen as an alignment with Commonwealth's historical legacy, reflecting its will to uphold the organisation's values and principles. However, this new political system has not yet been able to ease the political tensions in Togo where power has been held by the same family for 59 years, with a continuing poor reputation for upholding democratic principles. As this governance style contradicts the Commonwealth's fundamental principles, the organisation faces the uphill task of aligning its new member (Togo) with the Commonwealth Charter.

4. Discussion

The transition from a presidential to a parliamentary system, preceded by Togo's membership in the Commonwealth, represents more than a mere administrative change; it seems more like a way for the same political actors to strengthen their executive power. While the Results section detailed the legal and historical timeline of the political shifts in the country, this section interprets these developments through the lens of Authoritarian Resilience Theory. By examining the tension between institutional reform and the persistence of dynastic power, we can evaluate whether these shifts serve to modernise the state or simply to shield the ruling elite from domestic and international pressure.

In light of the above, what is going on in Togo indicates that the recent political reforms reflect the spirit of authoritarian resilience. In fact, as Nathan (2003) puts it, rarely have authoritarian regimes “managed to conduct orderly, peaceful, timely, and stable successions. Instead, the moment of transfer has almost always been a moment of crisis breaking out ahead of or behind the nominal schedule, involving purges or arrests, factionalism, sometimes violence” (p. 7). Indeed, in Togo, almost every election since President Faure Gnassingbé came to power has been a source of violence. Now that the Constitution of the Fifth Republic has removed term limits, alternation in power becomes all the more unlikely as long as President Faure Gnassingbé decides to run for office. This leaves doubts and uncertainty about the post-Gnassingbé era.

These fears are rooted in historical precedent in sub-Saharan Africa, where long-term incumbencies or lifelong reigns often end in socio-political instability. Most of the time, long reigns in this part of the continent fail to pave the way for a clear democratic transition. That is why a leader's death or departure generally triggers either military intervention or a succession crisis. In this context, Togo experienced a succession crisis following Gnassingbé Eyadéma's death in 2005, after 38 years in power. Similarly, in Côte d'Ivoire, following Houphouët-Boigny's death in 1993 (after 33 years in power), political instability ensued as rival factions vied for power after the end of Henri Konan Bedié's interim presidency in 1995. The same was true for Burkina Faso in 2014, when Blaise Compaoré, who ruled for 27 years, was finally ousted by a popular uprising, leading to political uncertainty marked by continued military interference in politics. In the same vein, in 2023, Gabon, long ruled by the Bongo family (1967-2023), witnessed a military seizure of power that ousted Ali Bongo, in power since his father Omar Bongo's death in 2009. Likewise, in Chad, the Déby family controls power, as Mahamat Idriss Déby replaced his father Idriss Déby, who died in 2021 after a 30-year reign. All these examples underscore the fragility of governance in many long-standing sub-Saharan African regimes, where power often remains personalised rather than rooted in true democratic institutions. Ultimately, such weak institutional foundations impede the prospects for

sustainable socio-economic development and the pursuit of the common good that sub-Saharan African countries, including Togo, should avoid.

Nevertheless, Togo is now part of the Commonwealth, which encourages member countries to uphold values such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights, good governance, and freedom of expression. In fact, if Togo adhered to the Commonwealth's principles, its membership could help address its political and institutional issues. Indeed, joining this organisation is a step forward toward improving a country's human rights, the rule of law, democracy, and good governance. However, Togo's Commonwealth membership has not yet produced tangible results regarding current developments in the country. According to Agyapong (2022), such a membership even raises questions about the future of Commonwealth principles and norms (p. 4).

According to the Harare Declaration, Commonwealth member countries should “work with renewed vigour, to protect and promote the fundamental political values of the Commonwealth in the areas such as democratic processes and institutions which reflect national circumstances, just and honest government” (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, 1991, para. 9). Buttressing this declaration, the Commonwealth Charter states: “Governments, political parties and civil society are responsible for upholding and promoting democratic culture and practices and are accountable to the public in this regard” (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, 2013, p. 3). Four years after its Commonwealth membership, Togo has not yet met the organisation's standards for democratic culture and practices, as its opposition parties and civil society organisations are prevented from exercising their democratic rights to the fullest, as evidenced above.

Togo's inconsistent compliance with the Commonwealth principles is even more blatant. For example, the state of the rule of law in the country leaves much to be desired. Yet, as a signatory to international treaties, conventions, and agreements, especially the Commonwealth, this should not be the case (unfortunately, it is). This is confirmed by Amnesty International (2024), which reports that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice ruled on many cases involving torture and ill-treatment in Togo and ordered the release and compensation of a dozen detainees held without trial since 2019. The court also condemned the arbitrary detention and ill-treatment of individuals arrested during the 2017 and 2020 protests. Nevertheless, the Togolese authorities did not agree to release the detainees (Amnesty International, 2024, p. 371). This indicates persistent human rights violations and a challenge to the rule of law in the country. This also means that the Commonwealth has not yet succeeded in having the Togolese authorities enforce the rule of law.

However, there is a ray of hope regarding the Togolese President of the Council, Faure Gnassingbé's new approach to easing political and social tensions. In fact, on the occasion of his 2026 New Year's address, he announced that he had granted pardons to several prisoners, most of whom were imprisoned because of their opposition to the way the country is governed. By doing so, Faure Gnassingbé fulfilled the promises of grace and clemency measures that he had taken to improve the social climate. The day after his announcement, several local media reported that more than 1,500 prisoners were concerned by the remission of their prison sentences. This constitutes a significant step toward political stability in Togo.

Nevertheless, the country's authorities should make sure that citizens are no longer wrongly imprisoned or tortured based on their political stance because a democracy without the right to disagree is not a genuine democracy but a democracy in name only. In fact, while granting pardons to prisoners is good, unlocking the political space to allow citizens to express themselves freely is better and aligns best with democracy and its related values. Failing that, some of the released prisoners may go back to prison or may be ill-treated. Indeed, cases of ill-treatment and torture are numerous in Togo. As the World Organisation Against Torture states

in its 2025 report, from 2021 to 2025, the ECOWAS Court of Justice condemned the Togolese Republic “on six occasions for acts of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment perpetrated by its agents against a total of 29 victims” (p. 3), with none of these decisions effectively implemented by the authorities to guarantee reparations for the victims.

World Organisation Against Torture further mentions that between 2017 and 2022, “at least 546 human rights defenders, journalists and political activists were arrested because of their opinions” (p. 6). On top of that, in terms of transparency and access to information, Togo is currently classified as “circumscribed” (World Organisation Against Torture, 2025). This suggests that while some information may be available, there are barriers which still prevent full institutional accountability and public oversight. Yet, the democratic standards that Togo claims to be strengthening by adopting a parliamentary system are inseparable from transparency, access to information, and institutional accountability. These are not merely ideals but functional requirements for a stable state. Togo is yet to reach this democratic culture. As illustrated by the figure below about the country’s ratings in terms of transparency and information access by World Organisation Against Torture, more efforts are needed for more transparency.

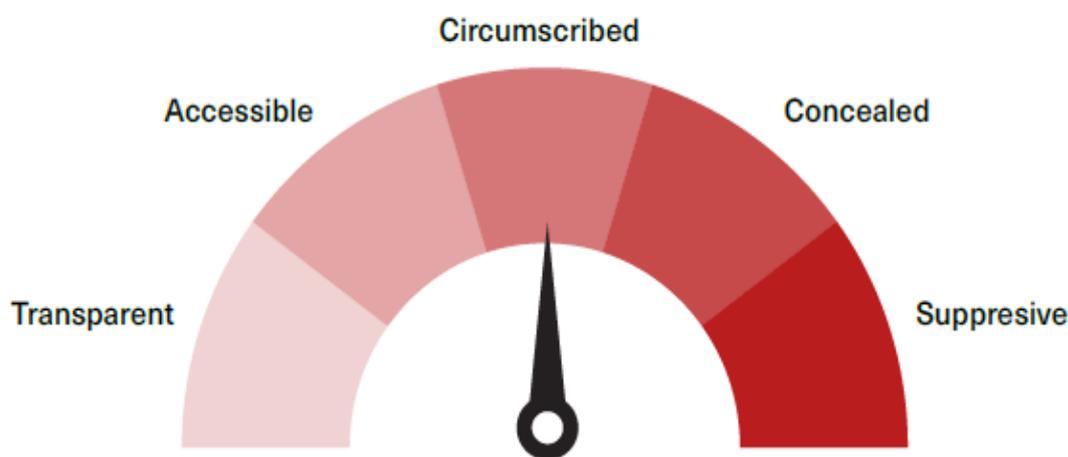


Figure 1. Togo’s rating in Transparency and access to information (Source: World Organisation Against Torture, 2025, p. 6).

From Figure 1, we can see that while Togo’s rating is not completely closed (concealed or suppressive), it is not transparent as it remains resistant to deep oversight (circumscribed). Therefore, even though the government uses “transparency” strategically (such as announcing mass pardons), if the country continues to maintain a “circumscribed” boundary around more sensitive data, journalists and NGOs cannot effectively obtain public records and human rights statistics.

Another area in which Togo’s parliamentary system and membership in the Commonwealth have yet to have an impact is that of freedom of expression, which the Constitution even guarantees. In this domain too, there is a discrepancy between the texts and the acts, as seen above. In its opening note on Togo, Amnesty International (2024) mentions that the authorities repress “the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly”, threaten media freedom by suspending newspapers and imprisoning journalists (p. 370). The report states that in 2023, the state of freedom of expression and assembly in the country faced significant challenges, as the High Authority of Audiovisual and Communication suspended two newspapers, *Liberté* and *Tampa Express*, for three months. In addition, in March 2023, two journalists from *L’Alternative* were sentenced to three years in prison (p. 370).

Furthermore, for the 2024 legislative election, “foreign journalists were banned from covering the voting and requests for independent observation were denied” (CIVICUS, 2024).

All this runs counter to the Commonwealth Charter, which clearly mentions: “We are committed to peaceful, open dialogue and the free flow of information, including through a free and responsible media, and to enhancing democratic traditions and strengthening democratic processes” (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, 2013, p. 4). Therefore, Togo does not comply with its Constitution or the Commonwealth Charter regarding freedom of expression. Consequently, political tensions resurfaced, especially following the 2024 constitutional amendments, which sparked protests.

Against this backdrop, while Togo’s accession to the Commonwealth was presented as an effort to strengthen democracy and good governance, diversify diplomatic and economic partnerships beyond the Francophone sphere, and promote English language proficiency to enhance global competitiveness, the limited impact of this membership suggests a strategic rather than transformative motive. In fact, from a critical perspective, the country’s Commonwealth membership seems to have served as a means to legitimise the institutional change that would enable the ruling party, especially its leader, to remain in power. Indeed, by aligning with this Anglophone organisation known for its democratic ideals, Togo projected an image of reform, seeking to adopt a political model uncommon in the Francophone world: the parliamentary system, which does not include term limits. However, not surprisingly, this system is not unanimously welcomed and may exacerbate an already difficult situation. Hence, a need for solutions to help the country uphold genuine democracy and good governance in order to ensure the political stability necessary for economic development.

Considering the evidence above, Togo has numerous red flags regarding democracy and its related values, including free and fair elections, the rule of law, human rights, good governance, and freedom of expression. Therefore, for the greater good of the nation, the Togolese authorities must commit to consistently upholding democracy and reinforcing democratic institutions, as provided for in the many national and international texts to which the country is a signatory. To help the authorities do so, the international community must not shy away from action. It must rather play an active role by using “diplomatic pressure and supporting democratic reforms”, and publicly condemning and taking resolutions to “push for necessary changes” (CIVICUS, 2024). Moreover, Togo’s civil society organisations should be trained, empowered, and funded to be more efficient in the fight for good governance and transparency, key pillars of political stability, economic growth, social equity, sustainable development, and public trust. In addition, the regional and international organisations to which Togo belongs must play an active role.

For this purpose, ECOWAS should encourage the government to respect fundamental civic freedoms, including the right to gather and to protest. This regional organisation can help Togo in this regard through effective field missions. That is, by maintaining a constructive dialogue with the President of the Council, the President of the Republic, and other authorities to urge them to have the country respect the principles of the organisation, especially as its 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance “has become a critical area of concern” (Aning & Bjarnesen, 2024, p. 3). In any case, the organisation should find the appropriate ways and means to help its member countries find solutions to their political issues. This is even vital to its relevance.

The same applies to the Commonwealth, which should take measures to make sure that its member countries, including Togo, respect its core values. To this end, its former Secretary-General Patricia Scotland visited Togo in July 2024 and conducted working sessions with the country’s authorities. On this occasion, she handed a copy of the Commonwealth Charter to President Faure Gnassingbé, a way of inviting him to have his country uphold the Charter’s foundational principles. Other visits by the Commonwealth Secretariat and capacity-building

workshops are necessary to help and encourage Togo's authorities to make greater efforts toward consistent compliance with the shared values. For example, in March 2025, Sierra Leone received a capacity-building workshop, aiming at bolstering the ability of its Human Rights Commission. Such a training session and well-planned good offices can benefit Togo. Otherwise, the political crisis could worsen and deteriorate the country's political stability, potentially leading to its suspension from both ECOWAS and the Commonwealth. Such an outcome would reflect poorly on the country and both organisations. Beyond all this, the solution to Togo's historical sociopolitical unrest should come from within; that is, it should be found in the willingness of the ruling elite to prioritise the national interest over the consolidation of executive power in the hands of a ruling family, creating a sort of dynastic rule, as demonstrated in the discussion.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the evolution of political authority in Togo, identifying the 2024 transition to a parliamentary system and the 2022 Commonwealth membership as key milestones in a long-standing dynastic legacy. The findings demonstrate that since the 1967 coup d'état, the Gnassingbé family has maintained power through a strategy of institutional adaptation. By shifting from the 1992 constitutional framework to a Westminster-style system, the current administration has effectively bypassed term limits while cultivating international legitimacy. In light of the Authoritarian Resilience Theory, these shifts do not represent a genuine democratic opening but rather a strategic consolidation of power. While the ruling party uses constitutional revisions to strengthen its executive dominance, the persistent dissatisfaction of opposition parties and civil society indicates an ongoing crisis of domestic legitimacy. The 2026 New Year's address, which announced the release of over 1,500 prisoners, may be seen as a tactical concession.

However, the analysis suggests that this is insufficient to resolve the country's structural political challenges. Ultimately, this research concludes that institutional changes alone cannot foster democracy without a real shift in political culture and the enforcement of the rule of law. To address the persistence of Togo's longstanding political crisis, the international community, specifically ECOWAS and the Commonwealth, must move from passive observation to active enforcement of their shared democratic values.

Although the qualitative approach used in this research enables detailed analysis of political reforms, future studies incorporating broader empirical data or additional methodologies could further enhance understanding of the issues identified in this study.

References

- Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2024). *Togo Revises Constitution to Eliminate Term Limits: An Explainer*. Retrieved March 4, 2025, from <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/togo-revises-constitution-to-eliminate-term-limits-an-explainer/>
- Africanews. (2024). *Togo's Opposition Rejects Constitutional Reform, Calls for Protests*. Retrieved October 5, 2025, from <https://www.africanews.com/2024/03/28/togos-opposition-rejects-constitutional-reform-calls-for-protests/>
- Agyapong, N. A. A. B. (2022). *The Expanding Membership of the Commonwealth: A Case Study of Gabon and Togo* [Master's dissertation, University of Ghana]. <https://ugspace.ug.edu.gh/server/api/core/bitstreams/7c93d29b-0379-4605-838a-1a028dae56ac/content>
- Amnesty International. (2024). *The State of the World's Human Rights*. Peter Benenson House.

- Aning, K., & Bjarnesen, J. (2024). *ECOWAS' dilemma: Balancing principles and pragmatism: West Africa's regional bloc faces disintegration after failed sanctions against military regimes*. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet. <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2133245.html>
- Central Intelligence Agency. (2024). *Togo*. Central Intelligence Agency. Retrieved December 28, 2025, from <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/togo/>
- CIVICUS. (2024). *Togo: Demands for Democracy Repressed—Again*. CIVICUS LENS. Retrieved March 4, 2025, from <https://lens.civicus.org/togo-demands-for-democracy-repressed-again/>
- Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. (1991). *The Harare Commonwealth Declaration*. Commonwealth Secretariat. <https://thecommonwealth.org/harare-declaration-1991>
- Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. (2013). *The Commonwealth Charter*. The Stationery Office. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-commonwealth-charter>
- Constitution de la République Togolaise*. (2024). Journal Officiel de la République Togolaise.
- Constitution de la IVe République*. (1992). Journal Officiel de la République Togolaise.
- Faseke, M. (2021). Africa and the Commonwealth: What Relationship Since 1994? *Asian Research Journal of Arts & Social Sciences*, 22–32. <https://doi.org/10.9734/arjass/2021/v14i230233>
- Heise, J. (2024). *Securitising Decolonisation: The Silencing of Ewe and Togoland Unification under United Nations Trusteeship, 1945-1960*. transcript Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839473061>
- Kohnert, D. (2021). *BTI 2022: Togo country report (2019–2021): Développement politique et socio-économique*. GIGA Institute of African Affairs. <https://mpira.ub.uni-muenchen.de/106561/>
- Loi n° 2019-003 du 15 mai 2019 portant modification de la constitution du 14 octobre 1992*. (2019). Assemblée nationale du Togo.
- Loi n° 2002-029 portant modification de la constitution du 14 octobre 1992*. (2002). Assemblée nationale du Togo.
- Nathan, A. J. (2003). Authoritarian Resilience. *Journal of Democracy*, 14(1), 6–17. https://nguienquuocte.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Authoritarian_Resilience.pdf
- Schofield, V. (2022). CHOGM 2022: A Very African Affair. *The Round Table*, 111(4), 524–525. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2022.2105528>
- Tété, G. (2018). *Et le peuple togolais de s'insurger pour la démission de Faure Gnassingbé*. L'Harmattan.
- World Organisation Against Torture. (2025). *Global Torture Index 2025: Togo Factsheet*. Retrieved January 4, 2025, from <https://www.omct.org/site-resources/files/factsheets/Factsheet-Togo.2025.pdf>
- Yates, D. (2022). Gabon and Togo Join the Commonwealth. *The Round Table*, 111(5), 634–635. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2022.2130622>