



Benin

Assessment: Fair

Trend: ⇄

Capital: Porto-Novo is the official capital;

Cotonou is the seat of government

Type of Government: republic under multiparty democratic rule

Head of Government: President Mathieu Kerekou (since 4 April 1996)

Minister of Foreign Affairs and African

Integration: Antoine Kolawole Idji

Population: 6,590,782

Human Development Index Ranking 2002: 158



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Benin has a **fair** record of support for democracy abroad. Benin is often credited with initiating the wave of democratization in Africa in the 1990s by virtue of its 1990 Sovereign National Conference and its subsequent elections.¹ This assessment is partially accurate, as several other African countries followed Benin's lead with their own conferences, though most produced less dramatic results. But in the past decade Benin has not been consistent in its efforts to promote democracy in Africa and elsewhere.

Benin has been quick to condemn attempts to overthrow democratically-elected governments, but at the same time it has been hesitant to criticize non-democratic regimes. For example, it has maintained close relations with a number of dictators, including Sani Abacha of Nigeria and Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo. Internationally, Benin has made some substantial efforts to promote democracy, such as sponsoring the Fourth International Conference of New and Restored Democracies in Cotonou in 2000, and has made all the appropriate statements concerning democracy, but has not backed up those statements through its votes in the United Nations.

FOREIGN RELATIONS BACKGROUND

Benin is a small country wedged between two larger states, Ghana and Nigeria, the latter the regional hegemon. Benin's economy is small with limited public resources and, therefore, the government does not support an active democracy promotion policy abroad. Benin's foreign policy priorities are limited to the West African sub-region and deal primarily with neighboring states: Nigeria, Niger, Togo and Burkina Faso. The country is heavily dependent on Nigeria economically, so it avoids criticizing the neighboring giant. Relations with Togo are mixed, as Benin is clearly more democratically advanced than Togo, and Beninois leaders have not always coexisted peacefully with Togo's entrenched President Eyadema. Given its size, one of Benin's foreign policy priorities is protecting its security and borders (it is currently engaged in a dispute with Niger over the island of Lete in the Niger river). Promoting democracy abroad is a foreign policy objective, but it cannot be said to be among Benin's priorities.

Benin's capacity to influence events in other countries is limited. Its leaders have few carrots to dangle in front of leaders from other states, nor do they have the sticks with which to punish them. Benin's prominent leaders of the past decade, Presidents Kerekou and Soglo, enjoy some degree of credibility and influence in the region, but significantly less than do other leaders, such as Mali's former President Alpha Oumar Konare.

Foreign policy in Benin is generally formed by a small handful of elites near the top of government, as it is in many African states, and there is little input from outside the government in the foreign policy making process, though the former colonial power, France, remains very influential in Benin's foreign and domestic policy-making. French bilateral development assistance totals more than one-third of all such assistance flowing into Benin, much of which relates to democracy promotion, and French businessmen play an important role in the Beninois economy.



RESPONSE TO OVERTHROW OF DEMOCRATICALLY-ELECTED GOVERNMENTS

Beninois officials have used forceful rhetoric in response to the overthrow of democratically-elected governments. In the words of one diplomat, “Wherever there will be a coup, we will condemn. We want people to accept the rules of the game.”³ In reality, Benin has been outspoken in condemning coups, but has been reluctant to take the next step and put words into action, for example by severing diplomatic ties with the illegitimate regime or supporting the imposition of economic sanctions.

When General Robert Guei staged a military coup in Cote d’Ivoire in December 1999, ousting freely-elected President Henri Konan Bedie, Benin was quick to condemn the act. But there was little further action: diplomatic relations between Benin and Cote d’Ivoire remained intact and economic sanctions were never seriously considered. There was a similar response from Benin to the coup in Niger in 1996, when Colonel Mainassara seized power from President Mahamadou Ousmane and won subsequent elections. Benin condemned the act but then did little else.

To his credit, President Kerekou involved himself in efforts to mediate the leadership dispute in Madagascar, in which challenger Marc Ravalomanana declared himself president after disputed elections. Along with the heads of state of Senegal, Mozambique and Cote d’Ivoire, Kerekou participated in negotiations between Madagascar’s rival presidents, Didier Ratsiraka and Ravalomanana in Dakar in April 2002.²

RESPONSE TO MANIPULATION OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES

There is little evidence of Benin responding adequately to the manipulation of electoral processes abroad. This is perhaps due to the questionable character of Benin’s own 2000 elections, which were won by Kerekou amidst allegations of fraud and corruption. Former President Soglo boycotted the run-off election between himself and Kerekou. The third place candidate boycotted as well, and Kerekou ended up contesting the run-off against the fourth place candidate from the first round, who happened to be one of his ministers. Kerekou won easily in a run-off marked by very low turnout. “We still have democracy even though we had bad elections,” asserted one Beninois diplomat. Given the questionable character of these elections, though, Benin’s leaders have put themselves in a more difficult position to criticize unfair elections in other countries.

Though there was some response from Benin to Guei’s successful coup in Cote d’Ivoire, there was minimal response to his attempt to rig the

subsequent elections by disqualifying virtually all of the viable opposition candidates. (Guei eventually lost to one of the few remaining candidates, Laurent Ghagbo.) Benin maintained relations with Guei while he was in power. According to one Beninois official, Kerekou told Guei behind closed doors to behave in a democratic manner, but there is no evidence of sustained pressure on Guei to change his ways.

Benin reacted poorly to a series of manipulated and annulled elections in Nigeria. Even during the worst abuses of the Sani Abacha regime in 1995, Benin maintained cordial relations, and Presidents Kerekou and Abacha were known to be particularly close. This friendship, according to the Beninois diplomat, “doesn’t mean that Kerekou was supporting dictatorship.” But Benin has not been willing to risk its dependency on Nigeria by using direct channels to influence the anti-democratic behavior of its friends in Abuja. Similarly, Benin recognized Nigeria’s 1999 elections, in which it is widely understood that the major parties engaged in fraudulent activities.⁴

There was no response from Benin to Zimbabwe’s recent elections, in which President Robert Mugabe blatantly manipulated the vote in his favor both before and on election day. Unlike Nigeria, Zimbabwe is of little strategic or economic importance to Benin, and therefore Benin’s leaders had little to lose if they were to speak out against Mugabe (as Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade did). Beninois officials claimed that Benin does not want to be seen as the overbearing parent. “We are reluctant [to criticize] because we don’t want to be seen as a giver of lessons” according to one diplomat.

PROMOTION OF INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

Benin has contributed positively to international democracy promotion by offering its internal democratization process as an example to others. “Benin has set the political pace for much of Francophone Africa,” according to Christopher Fomunyoh, Regional Director for Africa at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. “It was the first of many countries to use a National Conference as a political rite of passage in the transition from one-party or military rule to democracy.”⁵ National Conferences, in various forms yielding various results, were subsequently



attempted in the Central African Republic, Congo (Brazzaville), Madagascar, Mali, Niger, Gabon, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Togo and Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo).⁶ Notably, the leaders of Cote D'Ivoire and Cameroon refused to allow National Conferences.

Benin's former President Nicephore Soglo (1992-1996) made important contributions to promoting conflict resolution and democracy within the international community, particularly concerning the situation in Liberia. After he was elected to head the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1992, Soglo "immediately started working on elevating awareness of the Liberian conflict in the international community beyond Africa"⁷ and he continued with these efforts throughout his term.

More recently, Benin hosted the *Fourth International Conference on New and Restored Democracies* in December 2000. It is important to note that the conference was organized by the Government of Benin (as opposed to conferences organized by international organizations or NGOs) with the assistance of the United Nations Development Programme and the financial and logistic assistance of a handful of developed countries. Participants came from across the globe, and included states (some of which are decidedly undemocratic, such as Togo, Equatorial Guinea, Libya and Sudan), regional and international organizations and non-governmental organizations. Such conferences elevate the subject of democracy on the international agenda and make it increasingly difficult for authoritarians to hide behind the shield of non-intervention in sovereign affairs.

In the UN, however, Benin has a recent record of abstaining or voting "no" on several important resolutions relating to democracy and human rights.⁸ For example, in 2001 Benin abstained on Resolution 56/173 concerning the "Situation of human rights in the Democratic Republic of the

Congo" (Benin had voted in favor of a similar resolution offered in 2000 (Res 55/117)). Benin voted "no" on resolutions concerning human rights in Nigeria under Abacha in both 1997 (Res 52/144) and 1996 (Res 51/109), and abstained in 1995 (Res 50/199), which is tantamount to a "no" vote in this context. On resolutions on human rights in Sudan, Benin voted "no" in 2001 (Res 56/175) and abstained in 2000 (Res 55/116), 1999 (Res 54/182) and 1997 (Res 52/140). Further from home, Benin abstained on a 1997 resolution on human rights in Iraq (Res 52/141). It did, however, vote for a 1997 resolution recognizing the necessity of periodic and genuine elections (Res 52/129).

POLICY TOWARDS ENTRENCHED DICTATORSHIPS

Benin's commitment to promoting democracy abroad is further drawn into question upon an examination of its relations with its other immediate neighbor, Togo. Under President Eyadema, Togo is essentially an authoritarian state (rated "partly free" by Freedom House⁹) in which only modest moves towards democratization have occurred. Nonetheless, Presidents Kerekou and Eyadema remain close friends, even if they do not always behave the same politically. Benin has made some efforts to mediate in Togo and encourage its move towards democracy, primarily under President Soglo. This angered Eyadema, who actively worked to destabilize the Soglo government and supported Kerekou in the 1996 elections. For this reason Kerekou is hesitant to meddle in Togolese affairs both because he is indebted to Eyadema, and because he is aware of Eyadema's ability to disrupt Beninois affairs.

As mentioned earlier, Benin has maintained cordial and at times close relations with Nigeria, including under Sani Abacha, as a result of its dependence on this large, more powerful and wealthier neighbor.

¹ Fomunyoh, Christopher. "Democratization in Fits and Starts." *Journal of Democracy*. 12:3 (2001), 37-50.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Fomunyoh, p. 37.

⁶ Zartman, I. William, ed. "Governance as Conflict Management: Politics and Violence in West Africa." Washington: Brookings Institution Press. 1997. p. 41.

⁷ Heilbrunn, John R. "The Flea on Nigeria's Back: The Foreign Policy of Benin." in Wright, Stephen. *African Foreign Policies*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1999.

⁸ UN voting records from <<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/crsweb/docs/unvote.pdf> & <http://unbisnet.un.org/webpac-bin/wgbroker?new+-access+top.vote>>.

⁹ Freedom House. "Freedom in the World." <<http://freedomhouse.org/research/survey2002.htm>>.