

# The Burkinabé Revolt and its Implications for Long-Serving ECOWAS Heads of State

## 1. Introduction and Background

The recent ousting of Blaise Compaoré in a civilian-inspired revolt in Burkina Faso calls into question the fate of West Africa's two longest-serving heads of state: President Yahya Jammeh of The Gambia and President Faure Gnassingbé of Togo. Common between these two leaders is the fact that they both preside over Constitutions that have no presidential term limits. Already, there are pockets of violent protests in both countries over the issue.

In the case of President Jammeh he came into office in 1994 through a military coup d'état that deposed Dawda Jawara. Two years later, he retired from the army and conducted a presidential contest which he won in spite of the protestations and protests by the opposition parties. He has continued in office since then, winning three more elections in 2001, 2006 and 2011. His current mandate expires in 2016 but as the country's Constitution (which he crafted) places no term limit on him, he is poised to continue to stay in office.

For President Gnassingbé, he inherited the presidency after the death of his father in 2005. However, following the disapproval of ECOWAS of the dynasty-like inheritance of the throne, he later stepped down to contest presidential elections which he won on the ticket of his father's political party, *Rassemblement de Peuple Togolais* (RPT). He renewed his mandate in 2010 but has since then dissolved the RPT in what many political analysts believe is in preparation for another presidential term. The fact is that the Togolese Constitution has no presidential term limit. This means President Gnassingbé can run on a limitless basis.

## 2. Resistance against Extended Presidential Terms

It would be recalled that the resistance put up by the people of Burkina Faso is not the first of its kind in West Africa. As a matter of fact, the recent revolt is a continuation of mass resistance against ECOWAS leaders who have in the past attempted to extend their presidential mandates. The first to experience such popular resistance was Olusegun Obasanjo, whose attempt to change the country's Constitution was blocked by the Nigerian Senate in 2006. The second was Mamadou Tanjda of Niger, whose attempt to change the Constitution culminated in a military overthrow in 2010. The third was Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, who succeeded in changing the Constitution but was eventually defeated at the polls in 2012.

Evidence from the three countries mentioned above indicates clearly that the people of West Africa are no longer acquiescent or supportive of unconstitutional extension of presidential mandates. It can be further deduced that the current generation of West Africans aspire to see their region rid of autocracy and dictatorship. They want to see democracy take roots in the region and lead to the prosperity of the region in line with the ECOWAS Vision 2020.

### **3. What ECOWAS Can and Must Do**

We at the Ghana Growth and Development Platform (GGDP) appreciate the efforts of the ECOWAS leadership in resolving the numerous socio-political conflicts in the region. Notable among ECOWAS interventions have been the deployment of the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in Liberia, Sierra Leone, La Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau and Mali. Equally noteworthy have been the diplomatic interventions in Togo, Guinea and Niger that have led to peaceful resolutions of acute political conflicts.

However, we also believe that the regional body must be creative and proactive in finding long-lasting solutions to conflicts in the region. This is because most of the interventions, especially those involving ECOMOG, have been extremely expensive and have set back the developmental strides of the region, which is counted to be among the poorest in the world.

It is for these reasons that we are calling on President John Dramani Mahama, in his capacity as the Chairman of the Authority of Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS, to initiate processes that would lead to the passing of a resolution that ECOWAS will no longer recognize heads of state who serve more than two terms in office. We believe that such a resolution would checkmate Presidents Jammeh and Gnassingbé as they seek to extend their current presidential terms. It would also forewarn any leader romanticizing with the idea of an extended mandate.

We expect, of course, that such a resolution would be backed by behind-the-scenes negotiations that would forestall any diplomatic rows or heightened political tensions in The Gambia and Togo. We know very well that ECOWAS does not seek to act as a police and dictate to its Member States what form of constitutions they should operate. But, as stated earlier in this paper, it is obvious that ECOWAS citizens are no longer ready to tolerate monarchies. That is why we believe ECOWAS must act to prevent future violence.

### **4. Conclusion**

In the meantime, we wish to express our solidarity with the people of Burkina Faso and call on all civil society groups in West Africa to do same. We also call on ECOWAS, African Union (AU) and the international community to continue to engage with the stakeholders till an amicable settlement of the impasse is reached. We particularly call for technical and logistical assistance for the country's electoral commission to ensure that it would be in a position to organize credible, free and fair elections whose outcome would be acceptable by all political actors. It is our hope that ECOWAS would steadily and sturdily drive the process so that peace and calm would return to the good people of Burkina Faso.

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