

Was Togo's admission to the Commonwealth a symptom of declining Françafrique?

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31 December 2023



Analysis

<https://nileandkaplan.au>
NK0033852-23

Nile and Kaplan Publications

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Approved 12/2023

Published on 31 December 2023

ID: NK0033852-23

Abstract



Located in West Africa, Togo is a Sub-Saharan francophone country; home to just under nine million residents. Recent coup d'états in neighbouring Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso have riddled the region with political instability and a growing resentment toward French investors, diplomats, people and entities with general links to France. In recognising this regional rejection of French influence, Togo's admission to the Commonwealth was a foreign policy manoeuvre rooted in both pragmatism and ideology. A brief constructivist narrative argues that, in-order to avoid the inception of public strife in its own domestic landscape as observed in many of its neighbours, Lomé need to reform its identity or 'perception of self' in a pivot away from France; the anglophone pivot. Despite not having any historical links to the United Kingdom, Togo now enjoys access to developmental programs only available to member countries. Although it retains many cultural facets resulting from French colonial rule, Togo's anglophone pivot is symptomatic of declining Françafrique.

Publication last updated 23 July 2024

Cover photo

“KY Fellow” on Flickr (4x6 Lome 047) *Monument to recognise the Independence of Togo from France in 1960*, uploaded 23 August 2012.

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Togo, a west African Francophone nation with several links to France officially joined the Commonwealth in June 2022,¹ despite not having any historical associations with the United Kingdom. Whilst some analysts within the Commonwealth itself argue that Togo's admission to the grouping was predominately motivated by deteriorating global circumstances following the COVID-19 pandemic,² more evidence suggests that Togo's admission represented a symptom of **declining Françafrique**.



In international relations, the term “**Françafrique**” describes France's range of influence over former **French** colonies in sub-Saharan Africa.

How is Françafrique declining?

The rise and fall of the ‘dependence’ paradigm

Dating back to the 1960s, France's post-colonial ‘Africa policy’ had heavily relied on sustaining its links to a small echelon of African elites responsible for channelling its vast amounts of wealth. In-turn, this enabled the elites’ extraversion strategies to materialise, “whereby sovereignty in Africa [was] exercised through the creation and management of dependence”.³ In easier terms, France constructed a dependence paradigm by emerging as the chief beneficiary of African resources. In exchange for their cooperation, the ruling African elites leveraged this dynamic by accessing French military assistance as a means of solidifying their grips on power or achieving certain foreign policy goals that would have not been ordinarily possible.⁴ In fact, France has intervened militarily at least 20 times in various African states to preserve its

¹ “Our Member Countries”, digital webpage by The Commonwealth, 2023, <https://thecommonwealth.org/our-member-countries/togo>

² “Op-Ed: Gabon and Togo join the Commonwealth family, [news article] published by The Commonwealth, 2022, <https://thecommonwealth.org/news/op-ed-gabon-and-togo-join-commonwealth-family>

³ Jean-François Bayart, “Africa in the World: a History of Extraversion,” *African Affairs: the Journal of the Royal African Society* 99, no. 395 (2000), 228.

⁴ Nathaniel K. Powell, “Battling Instability? The Recurring Logic of French Military Interventions in Africa”, *African Security* 10, no. 1 (2017): pp.47-72

Françafrique interests.⁵ In effect, this has created a dependence paradigm wherein France and its ex-colony rulers fall deeply dependent on each other, although for different reasons.

In long recognition of this phenomenon, the citizenry of several West African nations had begun intensifying their revolt and weakening public order, enabling (however unintentionally) the rise of extremism. This has contributed to a West African landscape riddled with political instability.

Political Instability

With the emergence of successive coup d'états in neighbouring Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso between 2021-22, there has been an unprecedented push (by both insurgencies and citizens) to expel leaders with strong ties to France.⁶ For example in February 2022, thousands of Malian citizens took to the streets to celebrate the expulsion of the French ambassador⁷ whilst Burkina Faso's president Roch Kaboré was overthrown by his country's armed forces just a month earlier. Still, it was alleged that French authorities offered to evacuate him from the nation's capital Ouagadougou in ongoing proof of the special relationship between Paris and certain African leaders.⁸

Nevertheless, with the ousting of leaders strongly connected to Paris, it is fair to say Françafrique is on the decline.

However, wary of regional escalations and looking for a way to minimise the likelihood of a public uprising at home, it is plausible that the Togolese government sought to recalibrate its foreign policy by somewhat distancing itself from Paris through its conception of the "Anglophone pivot".

⁵ [Abdurrahim Siradağ](#), "Understanding French Foreign and Security Policy towards Africa: Pragmatism or Altruism", *Afro Eurasian Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2014): pp. [100-122](#).

⁶ Aljazeera, "Gabon and Togo Commonwealth entry is latest dent to French influence", *Features*, 12 July 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/7/12/gabon-togo-join-commonwealth-in-latest-dent-to-french-influence>

⁷ Aljazeera, "Thousands in Mali celebrate expulsion of French ambassador", *News [Armed Groups]*, 5 February 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/5/thousands-in-mali-celebrate-expulsion-of-french-ambassador>

⁸ Aljazeera, "Gabon and Togo Commonwealth entry is latest dent to French influence".

Togo's Anglophone Pivot

Togo stated that an essential factor in its pursuit of Commonwealth admission was “exposure to the Anglophone world of business and development partners”,⁹ and thus provided a convenient rationale for distancing itself from France. When commenting on Gabon’s admission to the Commonwealth at the same time as Togo, Nima Yussuf, a senior project manager at the ESP entrepreneurial fund, said “people are extremely excited...[because] they see the likes of Rwanda, which used to be Francophone but is now part of the Commonwealth and the sorts of benefits that it has had for the country”.¹⁰

Constructivist logic would assert that, in-order to evolve from its identity as an ex-French colony with residual connections to Paris, and still worried about worsening anti-French sentiments in the region, Togo needed to cultivate new relationships with non-French entities.

In this case, the Commonwealth.

Unsurprisingly, this is “perceived as a blow, as a confirmation of an evolving relationship with France and the fact that France is no longer necessarily the kind of exclusive and special partner of these countries”.¹¹

Concluding summary

This article investigated whether Togo’s admission to the Commonwealth represented a symptom of declining Françafrique in the sub-Saharan African region. By first contextualising how Françafrique grew to be so resisted in West Africa, this article deduced two rationales to explain the shift in Togolese foreign policy in its conception of the ‘Anglophone pivot’. In the first instance, worsening anti-French sentiments in the region **likely** necessitated Togo’s desire to seek new non-French relationships as a

⁹ Aljazeera, “Gabon and Togo Commonwealth entry is latest dent to French influence”.

¹⁰ Aljazeera, “Gabon and Togo Commonwealth entry is latest dent to French influence”.

¹¹ Aljazeera, “Gabon and Togo Commonwealth entry is latest dent to French influence”.

means of protecting itself from the contagion-like spread of political instability amongst its neighbours. Second, this article found that Togo's admission to the Commonwealth also stemmed from a desire to 'cease all available opportunities' for entry into the Anglophone world of economic and commercial enterprise to enhance its own development and governance capabilities.

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