

## Europe has a crucial role to play in the Togo crisis

Written by Nathaniel Olympio on 9 July 2019 in Opinion Plus  
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Togo needs the European Union to apply real pressure, says Nathaniel Olympio.



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When I'm invited to speak about Togo in a foreign capital like Brussels, I could begin my explanation in one of two ways.

I could start with the enormous potential my nation has, beginning with our advantageous location in West Africa which makes us a gateway to a market of 350 million people, our natural deep-water port at Lomé, our role as a financial centre and our young and skilled workforce which makes us a services and logistics hub.

The other way is to tell you that we have been ruled by the Gnassingbe family for 52 years, who have mismanaged the economy and a crushed democracy.

The tragedy of our nation lies in that gap, between the great potential and the currently oppressive

reality.

Togo is a fragile state with shocking poverty, which women suffer from more than men.

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The World Bank's Systematic Country Diagnostic has identified weak governance as the key barrier to reducing poverty.

Meanwhile, conflicts of interest and a lack of accountability to citizens have resulted in a failure to formulate and implement policies that could enable private economic activity.

Togo also has a poor human rights record, with the country experiencing political turmoil in the form of regular street protests throughout Togo since 2017.

Security forces are denying protest permits and shutting down civil gatherings while severe restrictions on public protests and freedom of expression remain in place in the capital.

Community organisers and human rights activists are jailed, and our so-called justice system is being used as an instrument of intimidation to smother opposition.

“The tragedy of our nation lies in that gap, between the great potential and the currently oppressive reality”

Past elections have been a foregone conclusion, partly due to the inability of many people to vote.

This is because 85 percent of citizens do not have an identity card while 75 percent don't even have a birth certificate.

This means that to vote, people just show up days before an election to register with two witnesses who confirm their nationality.

This leads to election fraud and leaves large swathes of the population feeling disenfranchised and without a feeling of connection to Togolese identity.

This has serious implications for the battle against terrorism which is taking root in the north of the country and could spread across the whole region.

Denying the benefits of Togo citizenship to Togolese nationals is not a good way to discourage home-grown terrorism.

It is crucial we recognise that effective counter-terrorism measures, the protection of human rights for

all and the rule of law are not conflicting goals, but complementary and mutually reinforcing.

It is incumbent on the international community to address the situation in Togo, starting with condemning the harassment, detention, and gunfire aimed at unarmed protesters, as well as the internet blackouts and other abuses.

“Togo needs the European Union to apply real pressure. We cannot do this peacefully on our own”

It should also be demanded that the ruling regime quickly resolve Togo’s identity card issue.

We also need to see effective observers deployed at the election next year to help combat fraud and improve transparency.

Togo needs the European Union to apply real pressure. We cannot do this peacefully on our own.

As with any other dictatorship, the voices of dissent from inside own country have little effect on those at the top.

We need powerful outside voices that the Gnassingbe regime will listen to. Their regime will eventually end. That much is inevitable.

My concern is how we make that change without creating instability in our country and the wider region. That is why my focus is on democracy and fair play for the elections.

We need transition rather than crisis, and the EU has a crucial role to play.

### **About the author**

Nathaniel Olympio is president of the Togolese political party Parti des Togolais

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