

## **Protestors turn out in thousands overcoming Internet shutdown**

CIVICUS speaks to KEPOMEY Koffi Dela Franck of the non-governmental organisation *Concertation Nationale de la Société Civile au Togo* about recent protests in the country over presidential term limits.

**Q: Access to the internet and social media was restricted in Togo between 5<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> September. Could you explain more about the reasons of this action?**

Indeed, access to the internet and social media was restricted in Togo during this period. The reason cited by the party in power was a technical breakdown, which is not true. The restriction was put in place to avoid the use of social media by opposition and citizens to inform the international public about the situation in Togo (massive opposition protest and repression by security forces after 10 PM). Other sources close to the party in power said it was to prevent people from disseminating images inciting violence.

This decision violates article 10 of Resolution A/HCR/RES/32/13 of 1 July 2016 adopted by the UN Human Rights Council on the promotion, protection and exercise of human rights on the internet.

**Q: What was the impact of this restriction?**

This restriction has not been without negative impact on the economy and social life in the country. Many economic operators are restricted in their economic activities and the population is deprived of information.

**Q: On Saturday 19 August 2017, protesters were killed during an opposition protest. Could you give more information on what happened that day?**

On Saturday 19 August the *Parti National Panafricain* (PNP National Panafrican Party) organised a protest in Lomé and in certain localities in the country (Anié, Sokode, Bafilo, Kara) to denounce the return to the Constitution of 1992 and the right to vote of the diaspora population.

In the course of this assembly, several people died (2 according to official sources, 7 according to the organisers) and numerous injured. At the same time, 66 people were arrested.

**Q: Do you know why the police reacted with this amount of force against the protesters?**

The organisers and the authorities did not agree on the itinerary of the protest. On Thursday 17 August 2017, the ministries of Territorial Administration and of Security declared, through a press conference, that no rally would be tolerated on 19 August 2017 in the whole territory and that the protests will be dispersed at the place they would begin.

It concerns a peaceful assembly that should be normally be guided by police forces (gendarmerie and police) according to law 2011-010 of 6 May on conditions of public assemblies. Sadly there were military officers at the places of the assembly who dispersed any gatherings (groups). This could explain the aggressive behaviour of the protesters.

**Q: How has the Togolese civil society reacted to the heavy-handedness of the police and to the killings?**

*Concertation Nationale de la Société Civile au Togo* (CNSC-Togo) issued a public statement the next day after the killings condemning the violence in all its forms, and requesting the government to take urgent provisions to appease the social climate including of the release of the arrested people. Additionally, CNSC-Togo has called on the political parties to better mentor/frame their activists/members, among other things.

The *Collectifs des associations contre l'impunité au Togo* (CACIT ; Collective of Associations Against the Impunity in Togo) also condemned the repression of the assembly. A group of 32 associations and networks on 24 August 2017 published a statement calling the government and other public actors to guarantee the exercise of the freedom of assembly, to ensure the professionalism of the security forces in the framing of assemblies and call the members/activists of political parties to respect public goods and infrastructure.

**Q: How would you describe the state of the freedom of peaceful assembly in Togo?**

The freedom of peaceful assembly in Togo is dependent on the political side that organises assemblies and protests. Members and sympathisers of the party in power organise assemblies with no restrictions even on working days. Which is

not always the case for opposition parties, who often face restrictions on itineraries and dropping-off points. Which means that peaceful assemblies can easily degenerate due to requirements of the security forces on site.

**Q: How would you describe the state of democracy in Togo?**

The democracy in Togo has crossed into difficult moments since opposition parties came back in the implementation of institutional and constitutional reforms in the recommendations of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission that the governments delayed to realise. Opposition parties suspect that the government is delaying to avoid translating the reforms into reality.

On Monday 30 June 2014 the draft law on constitutional reform/ revision introduced by the government in the Parliament following the dialogue known as Togotélécom II of May 2014 was rejected, with the members of parliament of the ruling party voting against the draft law.

Since then pressure has been mounting/increasing on discordant voices, including within civil society organisations that work in the area of promotion of democracy and rule of law. Pressure is often exerted on financial partners to deprive organisations of resources which enables them to become autonomous in their actions.

**Q: What type of support can regional and international groups offer to CNSC-Togo and other CSOs in the country in the current situation?**

Actually CNSC-Togo has difficulties in raising funds, and is satisfied with some micro-projects and fund allocation of traditional donors/partners of the government, in particular the European Union, UNDP close to the elections. These partners first receive authorisation of the government before granting the resources. What brings us often to self-censorship in our declarations and public assemblies.

It is necessary that you could put us in contact with other partners/donors that could bring us a sustainable financial support.

- Civic space in Togo is rated as “[Obstructed](#)” by the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), a live tool tracking civic space around the world.
- Follow *Concertation Nationale de la Societé Civile au Togo* on <http://www.cnsctogo.org/>